THE CAMP IN THE FOOTHILLS

BY HARRY CASTLEMON

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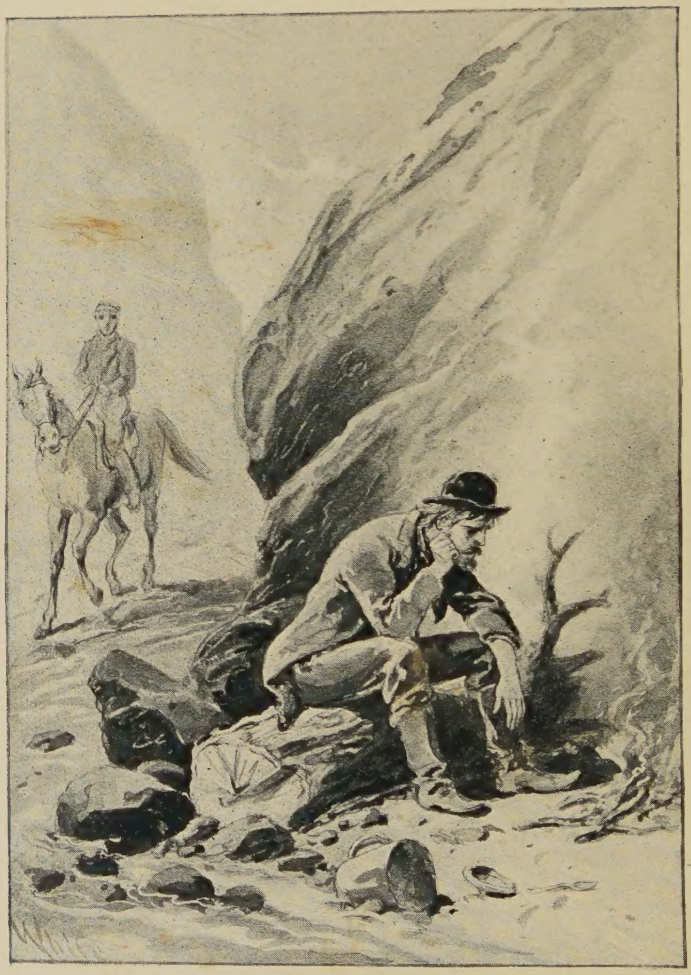

Tom Preston found.

THE CAMP IN THE FOOT-HILLS

OR

OSCAR ON HORSEBACK

BY

HARRY CASTLEMON

AUTHOR OF "GUNBOAT SERIES," "ROCKY MOUNTAIN SERIES," "WAR SERIES," ETC., ETC.

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THE CAMP IN THE FOOT-HILLS;

OR,

OSCAR ON HORSEBACK.

CHAPTER I.

AT THE COLONEL'S HEAD-QUARTERS.

"I DECLARE, I almost wish I was going with him!"

It was our old friend Oscar Preston who said this. He was standing on the platform in front of the station at Julesburg, gazing after the stage-coach in which Leon Parker, the disgusted and repentant runaway, whose adventures and mishaps have already been described, had taken passage for Atchison.

Oscar, as we know, had stumbled upon Leon by the merest chance, and fortunately

he was in a position to render him the assistance of which he stood so much in need.

By advancing him money out of his own pocket he had put it in Leon's power to return to the home he had so recklessly deserted, and those who have read "Two Ways of Becoming a Hunter" know how glad the runaway was to accept his proffered aid.

Up to this time Oscar had been all enthusiasm. There was no employment in the world that he could think of that so accorded with his taste as the mission on which he had been sent—that of procuring specimens for the museum that was to be added to the other attractions connected with the university at Yarmouth.

His head was full of plans. So anxious was he to make his expedition successful, and to win the approbation of the committee who employed him, that he had been able to think of nothing else; but when he saw the coach moving away from the station he began to have some faint idea of the agony Leon must have suffered when he found himself alone in

that wilderness, with no friend to whom he could go for sympathy or advice.

In short Oscar was very homesick. In a few days, if nothing unforeseen happened, Leon would be in Eaton, surrounded by familiar scenes and familiar faces, while Oscar himself would, in a short time, disappear as completely from the gaze of the civilized world as though he had suddenly ceased to exist.

Even with his inexperienced eye he could see that bad weather was close at hand. Perhaps before he reached the foot-hills the winter's storms would burst forth in all their fury, blocking the trail with drifts, and effectually shutting him off from all communication with those he had left behind.

He had never been so far away from his mother before, and neither had she ever seemed so dear and so necessary to him as she did now.

And then there was Sam—impulsive, good-natured, kind-hearted Sam Hynes—who had so long been his chosen friend and almost constant companion!

Oscar would have given much if he could have looked into his honest face and felt the cordial grasp of his hand once more.

Some such thoughts as these passed through the mind of the young hunter as he stood there on the platform with his hands in his pockets, gazing after the rapidly receding stage-coach, and for a moment he looked and felt very unlike the happy, ambitious boy who had left Eaton but a short time before with such bright anticipations of the future.

Then he dashed away the mist that seemed to be gathering before his eyes, pushed back his hat, which he had drawn low over his forehead, and took himself to task for his weakness.

"A pretty hunter I shall make if this is the way I am to feel!" was his mental exclamation. "I talked very glibly to Sam Hynes about going on a three or four years' expedition to Africa to collect specimens, and here I am, homesick already, although I have been away from Eaton scarcely two weeks. This will never do. I must get to work at once."

Just at that moment the stage-coach reached

the top of a high ridge over which the road ran, and Leon turned in his seat to wave his farewell to the boy who had befriended him.

Oscar waved his handkerchief in reply, and, having seen the coach disappear over the brow of the hill, he sprang off the platform and bent his steps toward the fort.

As he passed through the gate, the sentry respectfully brought his musket to a "carry." He had seen Oscar in familiar conversation with all the high officers belonging to the post, and that made him believe that the visitor, young as he was in years, must be a person of some importance.

He was well enough acquainted with the men who commanded him to know that they did not associate on terms of intimacy with everyone who came to the post on business.

Oscar walked straight to the colonel's head-quarters, and the orderly who was standing in the hall opened the door for him.

The room in which he now found himself was not just such a room as he had expected to see in that wilderness. The open piano, the

expensive pictures, the papered walls, and the richly upholstered easy-chairs that were arranged in order about the table made it look almost too civilized.

And yet there were a good many things in it to remind one of the plains. There was no carpet on the floor, but there were rugs in abundance, although they were not such rugs as we have in our houses. They were made of the skins of the wild animals that had fallen to the colonel's breech loader.

The commandant was not only a brave soldier, a successful Indian fighter, and a daring horseman, but he was also an enthusiastic sportsman and a crack shot with the rifle.

The walls of his room were adorned with numerous trophies of his skill as a hunter and marksman in the shape of antlers, skins, and deer heads (the latter not quite so well mounted as they ought to be, Oscar thought); and the brace of magnificent Scotch greyhounds, which were lying at their ease on an elk skin in front of the blazing logs that were piled in the huge, old-fashioned fireplace, were

fair specimens of the pack the colonel had imported for the purpose of coursing the antelope that were so abundant on the prairie.

The weapons the colonel used in war and in the chase were conspicuously displayed, and beside them hung Indian relics of all descriptions.

There was the shield that had once belonged to the hostile chief Yellow Bear, who had given the soldiers and settlers a world of trouble, and who was almost as celebrated in his day as Sitting Bull was a few years ago.

It was ornamented with the scalps the chief had taken during his numerous raids, and exactly in the centre of it was the hole made by a bullet from the colonel's rifle, which had put an end to one raid and terminated the career of Yellow Bear at the same time.

Hanging on one side the portrait of a distinguished army officer was the strong bow, made of elk horn, and braced with deer sinews, which the colonel used when he went out to hunt coyotes ; and on the other was the tomahawk he had wrested from the hands of the warrior who had rushed up to secure his

scalp when his (the colonel's) horse was shot under him.

It was by no means the terrible-looking weapon that Oscar had supposed an Indian tomahawk to be. It was simply a plasterer's hatchet, which the former owner had purchased of a trader.

The colonel, who was sitting in an easy-chair, reading one of the papers which Oscar had laid on his table the day before, looked up as the boy entered and pointed to a seat on the opposite side of the fireplace.

"Well, you have seen your friend off, I suppose?" said he. "You arrived in the nick of time, didn't you? The doctor says he honestly believes that Leon would have died of homesickness if you had not come just as you did. He has told me the lad's story, and I must say that, although I have often read of such things, I never really believed that any living boy could entertain notions so utterly ridiculous. Why, just look at it for a moment! You will begin your life on the plains under the most favorable circumstances. You will have the benefit of the experience of

every hunter about the post, both professional and amateur, be provided with all the necessaries that money can buy, be looked after by a competent guide, and yet before the winter is over you will wish a thousand times that you were safe back in Eaton again. Leon could not hope for the aid and comfort that will be so cheerfully extended to you. He intended to go in on his own hook, using as a guide some trashy novel, written by a man who probably knows no more about life on the plains than you do, and the consequence was that his want of experience got him into trouble at the very outset. That was a most fortunate thing for him, for if one of our Western 'blizzards' had overtaken him he never would have been heard of again. I hope his experience will be a lesson to him."

"I hope so, from the bottom of my heart," said Oscar as he took the chair pointed out to him, and patted the head of one of the greyhounds, which arose from his comfortable couch, and, after lazily stretching himself, came up and laid his black muzzle on the boy's knee.

CHAPTER II.

OSCAR'S OUTFIT.

"I HAVE had your luggage taken in there," continued the officer, nodding his head toward an open door, which gave entrance into a cosey bedroom adjoining the sitting-room, "for you are to be my guest as long as you remain at the post. Now I don't want to hurry you away, for those letters you brought me will insure you a welcome here and good treatment as long as you choose to stay; but my experience as a plains-hunter tells me that if you want to reach a country in which game is abundant before the bad weather sets in you had better start pretty soon."

"I know it, sir," replied Oscar. "I shall feel as though I was wasting valuable time as long as I stay here, and I am anxious to get to work without the loss of another day."

"Oh, you can't do that!" said the colonel. "The time you spend here will not be wasted,

because it is necessary that you should make due preparation before you start. I tell you it is no joke to spend a long, hard winter among the hills, no matter how well housed and provided with supplies you may be. You told me, I believe, that you had purchased a few things in St. Louis. Let me see them. When I know just what you have I can tell you what else you need."

As the colonel said this he arose from his seat and led the way into the bedroom which had been set apart for Oscar's use.

Producing a key from his pocket, the boy unlocked the small packing-trunk in which a portion of his outfit was stowed away, and brought to light two pairs of thick army blankets, which he handed over to the colonel.

"They will pass muster," said the latter, as he laid them upon the bed; "but those things," he added, as Oscar drew out a pair of heavy boots with high tops, "you had better leave behind. You don't want to load your pony down with articles that will be of no use to you."

"My pony! He can't carry all my luggage.

That box must go," said Oscar, pointing to a large carpenter's chest, which had once belonged to his father. "If I can't take them with me I might as well stay at home."

"What's in it?" asked the colonel.

"A complete set of taxidermist's tools, artificial eyes, a lot of annealed wire of different sizes, some strong paper for making funnels, pasteboard boxes and cotton for packing away the smaller specimens, and—oh, there are lots of things in it!"

"I should think so! Are you going to put up your birds and animals as fast as you shoot them?"

"No, sir. I couldn't do that with the limited facilities I shall have at my command. I simply want to put the skins in such shape that I can mount them when I get home. I brought the eyes with me because it is easier to insert them when the specimen is first killed than it is to put them in after the skin is brought to life again."

"What do you mean by that? I'd like to see you restore a dead bird to life."

"I didn't say I could do that," answered

Oscar, with a laugh. "But I can restore the skin to life."

"It makes no difference whether the body is in the skin or not, I suppose?"

"None whatever. I don't care if the body was cooked and eaten a year before the skin came into my hands. You see, it isn't necessary that we should use any extra pains in caring for the skins of animals. No matter how badly rumpled the hair may become it can be combed straight at any time. When the body has been taken out, and the bones you need are nicely cleaned, and the eyes are inserted, and the skin has been thoroughly cured with arsenic, it is rolled up and packed away until we get ready to use it."

"I should think that if you left it for any length of time it would become as hard as a brick."

"So it does, but that doesn't hurt it in the least. It is packed away in a box of wet sand, and in twenty-four hours it is as soft and pliable as it was when it was first taken from the animal. That is what I meant when I said I could bring a skin back to life."

"Oh! Ah!" said the colonel.

"Bird skins require very different treatment," continued Oscar. "The greatest pains must be taken with them. As soon as the specimen is killed the throat must be cleaned out and stopped with cotton, to keep the strong acid of the stomach from destroying the small feathers that grow about the base of the bill. It must then be put into a paper funnel shaped like the cornucopias that are sometimes hung on Christmas trees, and in that way it can be carried to camp without the ruffling of a feather. After the skin is taken off and cured it must be smoothly laid out between layers of cotton. If it becomes wrinkled, or the plumage becomes displaced, it is almost impossible to make a good job of it."

"Well, I declare!" said the colonel. "Yours is not so easy a business, after all, is it? I had no idea that there was so much in taxidermy. How long does it take to learn it?"

"A lifetime," answered Oscar.

"Then I don't think I'll bother with it; my

hair is white already, and the span of life that is left to me is so short that I couldn't master even the rudiments of the science. Now let's go back to business. The hunters in this country generally travel on foot, and let the ponies carry their supplies; but you will need a light wagon, and a good, strong mule to draw it. Those boots you will find to be very uncomfortable things to wear in this country in winter. A pair of Indian leggings and moccasins, which you can purchase of the sutler, will keep you much warmer," he added, as Oscar drew out of the trunk first the stock and then the barrel of a heavy Sharp's rifle and proceeded to put them together.

The colonel, who admired a fine weapon as much as he admired a fast horse and a good hunting dog, examined the rifle with the greatest interest, now and then bringing it to his shoulder and taking aim at the different objects about the room.

There were but few articles in Oscar's outfit, and they consisted of two suits of durable clothing, a light rubber coat, a heavy overcoat, which was provided with a hood instead

of a cape, a few fish lines, two dozen trout flies, a light axe, a hunting knife with belt and sheath, a frying-pan, some stout sacks in which to stow away his provisions, and lastly a neat little fowling-piece, which, being short in the barrel, and weighing but a trifle over seven pounds, was just the thing for use in thick cover or in the saddle.

Every article passed muster except the frying-pan. That, the colonel said, would do well enough for city hunters, but it would take up just so much room in the wagon ; and Oscar, before he had spent a month in the hills, would probably throw it away and broil his meat on the coals.

"Now what else do I need?" asked Oscar, after the colonel had examined all the articles in his outfit and passed judgment upon them. "I shall want some provisions, of course."

"Certainly. You will need some salt, two or three sacks of hardtack, a little dried fruit, a small supply of tea, coffee, sugar, and corn meal, a pony, mule, and wagon, and a good plainsman to act as guide and cook."

"I suppose the sutlers can furnish me with

everything except the last four articles," said Oscar. "Where are they to come from?"

"There will be no trouble about them. Orderly, tell Big Thompson I want to see him."

The orderly, who had entered the room in response to the summons, disappeared as soon as he had received his instructions, and the colonel went on:

"The mule and wagon can be found in the village; there are always plenty of them for sale, especially at this season of the year, and the pony can be procured here at the post. Two weeks ago a party of young braves, who had been out on a stock-stealing expedition, came in, very penitent, of course, and profuse in their promises that they would not do so any more; but I took away their arms and dismounted them, and have orders from the government to sell their ponies. They have been appraised by the quarter-master, and you can get one, ranging in price from twenty to to seventy-five dollars."

"They can't be good for much," said Oscar.

"There's right where you are mistaken,"

answered the colonel, with a smile. "They are just suited to the plains, and would live where an American horse would starve to death. And as for speed—well, we have horses in the fort that would probably beat the best of them in a race of three or four miles, but beyond that it would be safe to back the endurance of the pony. This man, Big Thompson, whom I shall try to induce to act as your guide, is my favorite scout. He has been out with me on several campaigns, and I know him to be perfectly reliable. As he says himself, he isn't much to look at, and, having been born and brought up on the plains, he is of course very ignorant, and has some queer notions. He is as superstitious as any Indian, and equal to the best of them in hunting and trailing."

"That reminds me of something," said Oscar suddenly. "My friend Leon said that, just before Eben Webster robbed and deserted him, they were warned by one of the escort of a stage-coach that the Indians were on the war-path. I hope I shall run no risk of being discovered by them."

"You need not be at all alarmed. The Indians to whom he referred were a party of young braves, mostly boys, who broke away from their reservation and went out to raid a camp of their sworn enemies, the Pawnees. They got neatly whipped for their pains, and, on such occasions, they always try to console themselves by taking the scalps of any small party of whites who may chance to fall in their way. They don't like to go back to their village empty-handed if they can help it. If they had happened to meet Eben and your friend they might have stolen everything they had, but it isn't at all likely that they would have attempted any scalping so near the post. Some of my troops have them in charge, and they are probably safe at their agency before this time. Here comes Big Thompson now."

As the colonel said this, the footsteps of the orderly sounded in the hall, and a moment later the door opened, admitting the man who was to be Oscar's companion and counsellor as long as he remained on the plains.

CHAPTER III.

BIG THOMPSON.

"HOW, kurnel!" exclaimed the newcomer.

"How!" replied the officer. "Sit down."

"The race of giants is not extinct, after all," thought Oscar, as his eyes rested on the tall, broad-shouldered man, who stepped across the threshold, carrying a soldier's overcoat on his arm and a slouch hat in his hand. "I don't wonder that he is called 'Big' Thompson."

He *was* big—that was a fact. He stood considerably over six feet in his moccasins, and must have weighed at least 250 pounds, although there was not an ounce of superfluous flesh on him.

He moved as if he were set on springs, and his tightly fitting jacket of buckskin showed muscles on his arms and chest the like of which Oscar had never seen before.

He wore no weapon, and in fact the boy did not think he needed any, for he looked strong enough to battle empty-handed with anybody or anything.

Like most big men he was good-natured,—his face testified to that fact,—and it needed but one glance at it to satisfy Oscar that the owner of it was a man who could be trusted under any circumstances.

"Thompson," continued the colonel, as the scout seated himself in the chair that was pointed out to him, and deposited his hat and coat on the floor, "this young gentleman is Mr. Oscar Preston, who has come out here from the States to spend the winter in hunting. He needs a guide who knows all about the country and the game that is to be found in it, and I have recommended you. Now see if you can strike a bargain with him."

The scout listened attentively, and when the colonel ceased speaking he turned and gave Oscar a good looking over.

The boy thought he could not have been very much impressed with his appearance, for,

after running his eyes over him from head to foot, he nodded his head slightly, said "How!" in rather a gruff tone—that was his way of saying "How do you do?"—and then settled back in his chair and turned his face toward the colonel again.

The latter went on to explain the nature of Oscar's business, and, as the scout knew no more about taxidermy or a museum than he did of chemistry or geology, the officer was obliged to make use of a good many words, and those of the simplest kind too, in order to make him understand what it was that brought the boy to the plains.

There were two things, however, that Big Thompson *did* comprehend, viz., that Oscar intended to spend the winter in some good game country, and that he was able and willing to pay liberally for the services of an experienced plainsman to act in the capacity of guide and cook.

The hunting Oscar intended to do himself. He hastened to explain this fact to the scout, adding that, when he presented his specimens for the inspection of the committee at Yar-

mouth, he wanted to be able to say that they had all fallen to his own rifle.

"Then we'll starve fur want of grub, an' you won't get none of them things," remarked Big Thompson.

"What things?" asked Oscar.

"Them what-do-ye-call-'ems."

"Specimens? Oh, I hope I shall! I have a room full of them at home now."

"What be they?"

"Birds, principally."

"Did you ever see a b'ar?"

"Not a wild one."

"Nor a painter nuther?"

Oscar replied in the negative.

"What do ye reckon ye'd do if ye should see one o' them varmints?" asked the scout.

"I am sure I don't know," was the honest reply.

"Wa-al, I kin tell ye. Ye'd take to yer heels an' leave me to shoot him. I've been huntin' with a heap of fellows from the States, an' that's what they all do."

"I know one fellow from the States who

will not take to his heels at the sight of a bear or a panther," said Oscar to himself.

He did not speak the words aloud, for, being no boaster, he preferred to be judged by his actions.

Before many weeks had passed over his head he had an opportunity to show what he was made of, and then Big Thompson found that he had been sadly mistaken in the boy.

If Oscar's courage had not been equal to his skill as a taxidermist the scout never would have seen Julesburg again.

"I reckon ye wouldn't mind if I should do a little huntin' an' trappin' on my own hook, would ye?" said Big Thompson after a moment's pause.

"Certainly not. All I ask is that you will let me go with you and see how it is done. It is possible that I may make my living for years to come in that way, and I want to know how to go to work. Now let's come to business. What wages do you expect, and do you want to be paid every month, or shall I settle with you when we return to the fort in the spring?"

"Wa-al, pilgrim, we'll settle up when we come back, an' it'll be afore spring too," replied the scout, with a grin. "A kid like yourself, who has lived in the States his hull life, aint a-goin' to stay all winter in the hills—leastwise not if he can get outen 'em. Ye hear me speakin' to ye?"

Without stopping to argue this point Oscar again broached the subject of wages, and at the end of a quarter of an hour the matter had been satisfactorily settled and all arrangements completed.

Thompson was to be allowed three days in which to make ready for the journey. He was a married man, and his cabin was located twenty miles from the fort.

He wanted to move his family nearer to the post, so that during his absence his wife could easily procure the supplies she needed from the sutler.

It would not be long, he said, before travelling on the Laramie plains would be next to impossible, and while he was gone he wanted to know that his family was well provided for,

and in no danger of being snowed up and starved to death.

He would be at the post bright and early on the following Monday, and would expect to find Oscar all ready for the start.

This much having been arranged, and the rate of the pay agreed upon, the scout put on his coat and hat and walked out, accompanied by the colonel and Oscar.

CHAPTER IV.

PICKING OUT A PONY.

STANDING in front of the door of the colonel's head-quarters was a sleepy-looking sorrel pony, saddled and bridled. He looked very diminutive when contrasted with the heavy cavalry horse from which an orderly had just dismounted, and so light was his body and so slender his legs that it seemed as if an ordinary twelve-year-old boy would prove as heavy a load as he was able to carry.

But to Oscar's great surprise Big Thompson walked straight up to the pony and vaulted into the saddle, whereupon the little fellow's head came up, his sleepy eyes opened, and, breaking at once into a gallop, he carried his heavy rider through the gate and down the hill out of sight.

Oscar watched him as long as he remained

in view, and then broke out into a cheery laugh, in which the colonel heartily joined.

"That beats me!" exclaimed the boy as soon as he could speak. "I think it would look better if Thompson would get off and carry the horse instead of making the horse carry him. His great weight will break the beast down before he has gone a mile."

"You don't know anything about an Indian pony," replied the colonel. "I once had occasion to send Thompson to Fort Laramie with despatches, and he rode that same horse eighty-five miles in twenty-four hours without the least trouble."

"I shouldn't have believed that little animal had so much strength and endurance," said Oscar, still more astonished. "Thompson doesn't seem to think much of my skill as a hunter, does he?"

"You can't wonder at it after the experience he has had with people from the States. He once shot four buffaloes for a gentleman living in New York, who cut off the tails of the game, took them home, and hung them up in his library as trophies of his own prowess."

"I don't see how he could do that," said Oscar almost indignantly. "I will gladly pay Thompson for any specimens I cannot procure myself, but I couldn't have the face to pass them off as my own. He hasn't a very high opinion of my courage, either. He thinks I shall be willing to come back to the fort before spring."

"That's another thing you can't wonder at. He knows what is before you, and you don't. Now you have two days to spend in any manner most agreeable to yourself—this is Thursday, and you are not to start until Monday, you know—and, if you are not too weary with travel, I think I can put it in your power to obtain two or three fine specimens before you start for the hills. Do you ride?"

"Yes, sir. I have broken more than one colt to the saddle."

"Then that is something you will not have to learn over again. Could you stand a fifteen-mile canter to-night?"

"I should enjoy it," replied Oscar with great eagerness.

"All right. We'll make up a little party

among the officers, and spend the greatest part of to-morrow in coursing antelope. That is a sport you know nothing about, of course, and I tell you beforehand that your horsemanship, and skill with the revolver and lasso, will be pretty thoroughly tested."

"Lasso?" repeated Oscar. "I didn't know that antelope were ever hunted with the lasso."

"Certainly they are; and it is the most exciting way of capturing them. You can't imagine what hard riding it takes to enable one to slip a lariat over the head of a youngster about six months old. The little fellows run like the wind, and have a way of dodging and ducking their heads, just as the noose is about to settle down over their necks, that is perfectly exasperating. On Saturday we will pay our respects to the wolves. They are not worth a charge of powder, but we manage to get a little sport out of them by shooting them with the bow and arrow."

"Then I shall not get any," said Oscar. "I don't know how to use a bow."

"You can't learn younger. The first thing, however, is to go down to the corral and pick

out a pony. The quartermaster knows all about them, and we will ask him to go with us and make the selection. Orderly, tell Major Baker I want to see him."

The major, who was the acting quartermaster, made his appearance in a few minutes, and the three walked leisurely toward the gate, discussing the merits of the captured ponies as they went.

At a sign from the colonel, accompanied by a pantomime that Oscar could not understand, a man who was sitting on the opposite side of the parade ground, with a blanket over his shoulders, arose to his feet and disappeared through an open doorway.

When he came out again Oscar saw that he was an Indian, and that he had exchanged his blanket for a coil of rope, which he carried in his hand.

He fell in behind the colonel and his two companions, and followed them down the hill toward the corral in which the ponies were confined.

There were twenty-five or thirty of them in the enclosure, and they looked so very small,

when compared with the cavalry horses that were picketed on the outside, that Oscar could hardly bring himself to believe that they were full-grown animals.

They looked more like colts, and it did not seem possible that they could carry a rider for weeks at a time, with nothing but grass to eat, or beat a Kentucky thoroughbred in a race of twenty miles.

The officers stopped when they had passed through the gate of the corral, and while the major was running his eyes over the herd in search of the particular pony he wanted to find, Oscar had opportunity to take a good survey of the Indian.

He was one of the Osage scouts attached to the colonel's command, and though not so large a man as Big Thompson, he was taller than either of the officers, and the battered stove-pipe hat he wore on his head made him look taller than he really was.

He wore leggings and moccasins, a gray flannel shirt, a tattered officer's dress coat, with a captain's epaulet on one shoulder and a sergeant's *chevron* on the other, and

the band on his hat was stuck full of feathers.

He did not look like a very formidable person, and yet, as Oscar afterward learned, he had the reputation of being the bravest man in his nation. He stood quietly by, with his lasso on his arm, awaiting the colonel's further orders.

"There he is! there he is!" exclaimed the major, laying his hand on his commander's shoulder, and pointing toward the pony of which he was in search. "Come here, Preston, and tell me what you think of him."

"I don't see him," replied Oscar, stepping behind the major, and raising himself on tiptoe, so that he could look along the officer's outstretched arm. "I can't tell one from the other. They are all sorrels, and look exactly alike to me."

"But there is a big difference in them, all the same," answered the major. "That fellow is a trained hunter, and worth fifty dollars of any man's money. He will follow a buffalo, antelope, or elk over the roughest ground or

through a prairie-dogs' village without making a single misstep, and without the least guidance from the reins. I know that to be a fact, for I have seen him do it. If you want something a little handsomer and more fancy," added the major, pointing to a pony that was trotting about on the outskirts of the herd, as if to show off the ribbons and feathers that were braided in his mane and tail, "there he is, and he is worth thirty dollars more."

"I don't care for anything fancy," replied Oscar. "I came out here to work, not to put on style. Those thirty dollars are worth more to me than they are to Uncle Sam."

"I think the buffalo hunter is the one you want," remarked the colonel. "You will have two days in which to try him, and if he doesn't suit you can bring him back and exchange him for another."

So saying he turned to the Osage, and pointing out the horse in question, told him to secure it.

The Indian at once went in among the ponies, which had retreated to the furthest corner of the corral, and when he came out

again, leading the buffalo hunter by his lasso, which he had twisted about the animal's lower jaw, the rest of the herd turned and followed at his heels.

The presence of the Indian seemed to quiet them at once. They stood in no fear of him; but the moment they caught sight of the white men, who were waiting in front of the gate, they wheeled in their tracks and ran back to the other end of the corral again.

When Oscar came to take a good look at the animal he told himself that he was the homeliest thing in the shape of a pony he had ever seen.

There were a dozen others in the corral, which, if left to himself, he would have selected in preference to this one.

He was not at all pleased with the animal's actions, either; for when he advanced to lay his hand upon him the pony snorted loudly, threw his ears close to his head, and retreated away from him as far as the length of the lariat would allow. He was vicious as well as homely.

CHAPTER V.

LARAMIE PLAINS.

"THAT'S the way they all do at first," said the colonel, smiling at the rueful look on Oscar's face. "An Indian pony doesn't like a white man any better than his master does, and, like his master, he must be forced into submission. You are not afraid of him, I suppose?"

"Oh, no, sir. Just let me get on his back, with a good bit in his mouth, and I'll manage him."

While on the way back to the fort the colonel, with the major's assistance, arranged all the details of the hunting expeditions that were to come off during the next two days, and named the officers of the garrison who, being off duty, would be at liberty to take part in them.

It was decided that as soon as dress parade and supper were over the party would leave

the fort on horseback, taking with them a light wagon, in which to carry their tents and provisions, and bring back any game that might chance to fall to their rifles.

By midnight they would reach a small stream which ran through a country much frequented by antelope in the early hours of the morning.

There they would camp and sleep until daylight, when they would take to their saddles again and begin the hunt.

Having reached the gate the colonel gave the Indian some instructions concerning Oscar's pony, after which he and the major walked on to their quarters, while Oscar bent his steps toward the sutler's store, where he purchased a saddle and bridle, a rawhide lasso and picket pin, and a pair of elk-skin moccasins and leggings.

He hung the saddle, bridle, and lasso upon a peg behind the stall in which the Indian had left his pony, and the other articles were carried into his bedroom and stored away in his trunk.

After that Oscar had nothing to do but to

amuse himself in any way he saw fit. His first care was to get ready for the hunt, so that no time would be lost when the hour for the start arrived.

He filled his belt with cartridges for his rifle and revolver, placed these weapons where he could readily lay his hands upon them, took from his trunk one of the thick, coarse suits of clothing he intended to wear while in the hills, and then set out to look about the fort.

He took a good survey of the stables and barracks, peeped into all the warehouses that were open, watched the teamsters, who were busily engaged in hauling the winter's supply of wood into the fort, and finally, growing tired of passing the time in this way, he went back to the stable to take another look at his pony.

As he walked up and down the floor behind the stall in which the animal was hitched, he incautiously approached a little too near his heels. In an instant the pony's little ears were thrown back close to his head, and his hind feet flew up into the air with tremendous force, but Oscar was just out of reach.

Fortunately he saw the motion of the

pony's ears, and, suspecting mischief, he jumped aside just in time to avoid the blow, which, had it been fairly planted, would have ended his career as a taxidermist then and there.

"That's your game, is it!" exclaimed Oscar, picking up the hat that had fallen from his head. "Well, if you want a fight we may as well have it out now as any time."

So saying, Oscar took his bridle down from its place on the peg and walked into the stall.

The pony must have been astonished at his boldness, and perhaps he was cured by it. At any rate he offered but little resistance as Oscar forced the bit into his mouth and strapped the saddle on his back.

He raised no objections either when the boy, having led him out of the stable, prepared to mount him; but he did not wait for him to be fairly seated in the saddle.

No sooner had Oscar placed his foot in the stirrup and swung himself clear of the ground than the pony broke into a gallop and carried him swiftly out of the gate.

Oscar could ride almost as well as he could shoot. He was quite at home in the saddle, and it seemed like old times to find himself moving over the ground with a speed almost equal to that of a bird on the wing, and to hear the wind whistling about his ears.

The pony was perfectly willing to go and the boy was perfectly willing to let him.

Up one hill and down another he went at an astonishing speed, and when at last his rider thought he had gone far enough he attempted to check him by pulling gently on the reins that were buckled to the snaffle bit and talking to him in English.

But the pony, which had all his life been accustomed to the severest treatment,—an Indian has no more mercy on his favorite horse than he has on the captives that fall into his hands,—was not to be controlled by gentle measures or smooth words uttered in an unknown tongue, so Oscar was obliged to resort to the curb.

That was something the pony could understand, for he was used to it. After he had been thrown almost on his haunches three or

four times he slackened his pace and finally settled down into a walk.

Then Oscar straightened up, pushed his hat on the back of his head, and looked about him. He was alone on the prairie.

Even the top of the tall flag-staff which arose from the parade ground in the fort was hidden from view by the last swell over which the pony had carried him.

But there was no danger of getting lost, for the trail was as clearly defined as any country road he had ever travelled.

He followed it to the summit of the next hill, which, being higher than the surrounding ones, brought the flag-staff and a portion of the hamlet of Julesburg again into view, and there he stopped to take a survey of the country.

The ridge on which he stood stretched away behind him as far as his eye could reach, and in front terminated in a steep bluff, perhaps a hundred feet in height, at the base of which flowed the dark waters of the Platte.

To the north and west the long, regular swells gave place to innumerable ravines, which crossed and recrossed one another,

and twisted about in the most bewildering fashion.

They were deep and dark, and their precipitous sides were so thickly covered with stunted oaks and pines that the light of the sun rarely penetrated to the bottom of them, even at mid-day.

In the years gone by these same ravines had afforded secure hiding-places for the hostile Sioux, who had so stubbornly resisted the onward march of the white man.

From their cavernous depths they had poured forth in overwhelming numbers to pounce upon some wagon train, and in them they had found refuge when worsted in conflict with the troops, their perfect knowledge of the ground enabling them to effectually baffle pursuit.

Far beyond the ravines, long miles away, and yet rendered so distinct by the clear atmosphere that it seemed to Oscar that but a few hours' ride would be required to take him to it, was a tract of level prairie, which stretched away through four degrees of longitude to the foot-hills.

This level prairie was known as the Laramie plains, and even so far back as the day Oscar gazed upon it it was historic ground. Little mounds of stone, and the bleaching and crumbling bones of horses and cattle, marked the spot where more than one desperate battle had been fought between the hardy pioneers and their savage foes, and when Oscar, a few days later, was brought face to face with these mementoes, he wondered at his own temerity in so eagerly accepting a commission that took him to a country in which such scenes had been enacted.

He knew that the Laramie plains were still debatable ground; that the outrages that had been perpetrated there might at almost any day be repeated.

It was true that the country was now thickly settled,—at least the old pioneer thought so,—that comfortable ranches and dug-outs were scattered over the prairie, from fifteen to twenty miles apart, and that numerous droves of sheep and cattle cropped the grass which had once afforded pasturage for countless thousands of buffalo; but these evi-

dences of the irresistible progress of civilization did not intimidate the Indian. They rather served to enrage him and to excite his cupidity.

Isolated ranches could be easily plundered, and the flesh of sheep and cattle was fully as palatable as that of the buffalo, which had been driven away.

Of course there was no trouble to be apprehended at that season of the year, it being too near winter for the Sioux to break out into open hostilities.

A plains Indian does not like to move during the snowy season. Indeed it is almost impossible for him to do so, for the reason that his main dependence—his pony (without which, so old hunters say, the Indian is not a foe to be feared)—is utterly unfit for service.

His food being deeply buried under the drifts, he is forced to content himself with the branches of the cottonwood, which the squaws cut for him to browse upon.

He becomes reduced almost to a skeleton, and even staggers, as he walks about to find some sheltered nook into which he can retreat

for protection from the keen winds which cut through the thickest clothing like a knife.

His master, whom he has perhaps carried safely through a score of successful hunts and forays, pays not the slightest attention to him.

Comfortably settled in his teepee, hugging a little fire over which a white man would freeze to death, the warrior sits with his buffalo-robe around him, passing the time in smoking and sleeping, but arousing himself at intervals to engage in a game of chance with some of his companions, or to send his squaw to the agency to draw the rations a generous government provides for all the "good" Indians.

But when spring comes, and the snow melts away, and the tender grass begins to spring and grow luxuriantly beneath the genial influence of the sun, a great change takes place in the Indian and his pony.

The latter quietly sheds the long, rough coat he has worn all winter, and with it the burrs and mud with which he was covered; his ribs disappear, his skeleton frame begins to swell

out into a well-rounded form, and all his old-time life and spirit come back to him; while his master, having shaken off his lethargy, polishes up his weapons, lays in a new supply of ammunition, and begins to look about for something to do—something that will add new laurels to those already won.

If he can find the least excuse for so doing he is ready at any moment to take the war-path. Oftentimes he has no excuse at all beyond a desire to gratify his incontrollable propensity for stealing and shooting.

Not infrequently a company of boys, who are ambitious to prove themselves expert thieves, and thus render themselves candidates for the "sun-dance," through which trying ordeal all must pass before they become full-fledged warriors, break away from their agency and raid upon the sheep and cattle herders before spoken of.

Sometimes whole bands and tribes break out in this way, and spend the summer in dodging the troops and sacking defenseless ranches.

While the brave is on the war-path he is a

"bad" Indian, and runs the risk of being shot by anybody who meets him ; but in spite of this he enjoys himself to the utmost while summer lasts.

It is not until the pleasant weather draws to a close, and all the ranches he can find have been plundered and burned, and all the sheep and cattle in the country have been captured or dispersed, and the fall buffalo-hunt is over, and the cold winds begin to sweep over the plains, that the Indian becomes repentant.

Then he thinks of his warm teepee in that sheltered nook in the ravine, where his family has lived all summer, subsisting upon government rations, and he makes all haste to return to it before the snows of winter come to shut him up in the mountains.

CHAPTER VI.

A RIDE THROUGH THE SAGE-BRUSH.

THE moment the repentant and plunder-laden warrior reaches his reservation he becomes one of the "good" Indians, and is entitled to all the privileges the government accords to them.

These privileges consist principally in drawing rations, riding stolen horses, dressing in stolen clothing, carrying stolen weapons, and wearing as an ornament on his shield the scalp of the unfortunate ranchman to whom the aforesaid stolen property once belonged. He does this too right before the face and eyes of the agent, who will not arrest him, and the troops dare not.

"It must be a fine thing to be an Indian," said Oscar to himself as thoughts something like these passed through his mind—"nothing to do, and plenty to eat and wear. But, on the whole, I think I'd rather be a taxidermist.

Now, where shall I go? I would explore one of these gullies if it were not for the associations connected with them. I should expect a band of hostiles to jump down on me at any moment. But I'll go, anyway. A pretty hunter I shall make if I am afraid to ride into a ravine just because it is dark. It isn't at all probable that I shall see a living thing."

With this reflection to comfort him and keep up his courage Oscar urged his pony forward, and rode slowly along a well-beaten path that ran through a thicket of sage-brush and led in the direction he desired to go.

Then, for the first time since leaving the fort, he wished that he had brought his double-barrel with him, for he saw "specimens" on every side. They first appeared in the shape of a flock of sage-hens, which suddenly arose from the brush close in front of him, and sailed away toward the foot of the ridge.

They were a little larger than the ruffed grouse Oscar had so often hunted in the hills about Eaton, and their flight, though strong and rapid, was so even and regular that he

would have had no trouble whatever in picking out a brace of the best birds in the flock.

True to his hunter's instinct, Oscar marked them down very carefully, and while he sat in his saddle, looking first at the fort and then at the place where he had seen the birds settle to the ground, debating with himself whether or not it would be a good plan to go back and get his gun, something that looked like a yellowish-gray streak emerged from the sage brush, and ran with surprising swiftness down the path, which, at this point, happened to be perfectly straight. Just before it reached the first turn it halted suddenly, and gave Oscar a view of the first mule rabbit he had ever seen.

He did not wonder at the name it bore, nor did he any longer doubt the truth of the stories he had often read in regard to the attempts made by old plainsmen to pass the creature off on inexperienced pilgrims as a genuine mule. Its ears looked altogether too long for so small an animal, and Oscar wondered if they did not sometimes get in its way.

He studied the rabbit with a great deal of interest, noting particularly the position of the body and the ears. He knew now how he would set up the first one he brought to bay.

"It's a lucky thing for you that I left my gun behind, my fine fellow," said Oscar, as he rode slowly toward the rabbit, which gazed at him as if he were no more to be feared than one of the sage-bushes that lined the path. "You would be booked for Yarmouth, sure. If I only had you out on the open prairie, I'd make you show how fast you could run!"

When the rabbit thought Oscar had come near enough, he began moving away with long, deliberate bounds, and at the same moment the boy gave his pony the rein and started forward in pursuit.

The animal heard the clatter of hoofs behind him, and letting out two or three sections in its hind legs,—that is the way old plainsmen express it, when they want one to understand that a rabbit has made up his mind to exhibit his best speed,—he shot ahead like an arrow

from a bow, and was out of sight in a twinkling.

He did not turn into the bushes, but kept straight down the path, completely distancing the pony before the latter had made a dozen jumps.

"Oh, if I only had some dogs like the colonel's!" said Oscar, after he had succeeded in making his horse comprehend that he was expected to settle down into a walk once more. "With a brace of greyhounds to run antelopes, wolves, and jack rabbits, and a well broken pointer to hunt sage hens, one could see splendid sport right here in the neighborhood of the fort. I am sure those birds would lie well to a dog, and I have not the least doubt——"

The young hunter's soliloquy was cut short by the sight of an apparition in blue flannel and buckskin which just then came into view.

It proved, on second look, to be a man dressed in the garb of a hunter; but such a man and such a garb Oscar had never seen before. No description could do them justice.

The man belonged on the plains, that was evident. So did Big Thompson, to whom Oscar had that day been introduced; but the two were as different in appearance as darkness and daylight.

The one had gained Oscar's confidence the moment he looked at him; but the sight of this man aroused a very different feeling in his breast, and caused him to bless his lucky stars that the meeting had taken place so near the fort.

He was a person whom the young hunter would not have cared to meet in any lonely spot.

With a muttered exclamation of anger, the man jerked his horse part-way out of the path, and Oscar made haste to ride on and leave him out of sight.

CHAPTER VII.

ANOTHER UNEXPECTED MEETING.

WHEN two or three bends in the path had shut the stranger out from view, Oscar drew a long breath of relief and began a mental description of him.

He was fully as tall as Big Thompson, as thin as a rail, and blessed with a most sneaking, hangdog cast of countenance. He was clad in a blue flannel shirt, a soldier's overcoat, and a pair of buckskin trousers, all of which had grown dingy with age and hard usage.

On his head he wore a brimless slouch hat, and on his feet a pair of ancient moccasins, and between the moccasins and the tattered bottom of his trousers—which were much too short for him—could be seen an ankle which was the color of sole-leather. His hands and the very small portion of his face that could be seen over a mass of grizzly whiskers, were of the same hue.

This uncouth object sat on his saddle—a piece of sheepskin—with his back rounded almost into a half circle, and his long neck stretching forward over his pony's ears.

He did not look like a very dangerous character, but still there was something about him which made Oscar believe that he was a man to be feared.

While the young hunter was busy with his mental photograph of the stranger, his pony was walking rapidly down the path which now emerged from the sage-brush and entered the mouth of one of the ravines.

Oscar looked into its gloomy depths and drew in his reins, although he did not draw them tightly enough to check the advance of his pony.

"I don't know whether I had better go in there or not," thought Oscar, facing about in his saddle to make sure that the ill-looking fellow who had obstructed his path in the sage-brush was out of sight. "If he followed this road, he must have come out of this ravine, and who knows but there may be more like him hid away among these trees and bushes?

But who cares if there are?" he added, slackening the reins again. "If I am going to be a hunter, I may as well begin to face danger one time as another, for it is something I cannot avoid. I'll never start out by myself again without my rifle or shotgun."

The path was quite as plainly defined at this point as it was in the sage-brush, and of course Oscar had no difficulty in following it. Neither did he have any fears of being lost in the labyrinth before him, for all he had to do when he had ridden far enough was to turn about and the path would lead him back to the sage-brush again.

He kept on down the ravine for a mile or more, peering into the dark woods which had so often echoed to the war-cry of the hostile Sioux, wondering all the while who the strange horseman was and where he lived, and finally he began to think of retracing his steps, but just then his ear caught the sound of falling water a short distance in advance of him.

He had heard much of the trout-streams of this wild region, and his desire to see one

induced him to keep on, little dreaming that when he found the stream he would find something else to interest him.

When Oscar had ridden a few rods farther he came within sight of the falls, the music of whose waters had attracted his attention, and also in sight of a smouldering camp fire. Seated on a log in front of it, with his elbows on his knees and his chin resting on his hands, was a figure almost as forlorn and dilapidated in appearance as was the horseman he had seen in the sage-brush.

He was gazing steadily into the fire and seemed to be very much engrossed with his own thoughts; but when the sound of the pony's hoofs fell upon his ear he sprang up and gazed at Oscar as if he were fascinated.

The camp, upon which our hero had so unexpectedly stumbled, was located in the mouth of a ravine that branched off from the one he had followed from the foot of the ridge.

The fire was built upon the opposite bank of the stream, which here ran across the main ravine to mingle its waters a few miles farther

on with those of the Platte, and behind it was a clear space a dozen or more feet in diameter that served as the camp.

Various well-known signs, which did not escape his quick eye, told Oscar that the camp had been occupied for several days, and yet nothing in the way of a shelter had been erected, the campers, no doubt, being fully satisfied with the protection afforded them by the overhanging cliff and the thick cluster of evergreens that grew at its base.

And there were other things missing, too, which Oscar had never failed to see in every camp whose inmates had any respect for their health and comfort. The supply of wood was exhausted, and although there was an axe handy the campers had sat musing by the fire until it had amost burned itself out, being too lazy to chop a fresh supply of fuel.

There was nothing in the shape of bed clothes in sight, or any provisions, or any packages that looked as though they might contain provisions; and the only cooking utensil to be seen was a battered and blackened coffee-pot, which lay on the edge of the

brook, where it had stopped when its owner angrily kicked it out of his way.

Having noted these evidences of the extreme poverty and utter shiftlessness of the campers, the young hunter turned his attention to the figure before the fire, who still stood and gazed at him as if he were spellbound.

They boy was somewhat surprised at the result of his hurried observations, for he saw at once that the camper was not a born plainsman. Beyond a doubt he had known better times. His clothing, as well as a certain indefinable air and manner which are inseparable from those who have all their lives been accustomed to good society, loudly proclaimed these facts.

He looked like a broken-down gentleman, but still there was something of the backwoods about him, too. A stiff hat that had once been black covered his long uncombed hair, and his clothing was all of the finest broadcloth, and cut in faultless style; but his trousers were worn in a pair of heavy cowhide boots, and a glaring red shirt-collar was turned down over the collar of his coat. He

was young in years, but wore a full beard and mustache, the latter having been long and carefully cultivated, while the whiskers were of recent growth.

Oscar took all these little points in at a glance, and was about to turn away with an apology for his intrusion, when something in the carriage of the head and the position assumed by the camper caused him to pause long enough to look him over a second time. He had never seen the face before, that was certain; but there was something about the form that seemed familiar to him.

"It is nothing but a foolish notion of mine, of course," said Oscar to himself, as he drew in the reins preparatory to turning his pony about.

Then speaking aloud, he said:

"I didn't mean, sir, to jump over in your camp in this unceremonious way. I wasn't aware there was anyone here. I wish you good-day!"

To Oscar's unbounded surprise, the reply that came across the brook was a volley of violent imprecations. They were called forth,

not by anger, apparently, but by overwhelming amazement ; and the strangest part of the whole proceeding was that they were uttered by a familiar and well-known voice—a voice that Oscar had not heard for many a long month.

The effect of this interchange of compliments was astonishing. The camper came close to the bank of the stream, and leaning forward until his body was bent almost double, shaded his eyes with his hand and gazed fixedly at Oscar, who, having suddenly grown too weak to keep his feet in his stirrups, was obliged to cling to the horn of his saddle with both hands, in order to keep his swaying body from toppling over headlong to the ground.

They stood thus for a few seconds without speaking, and then the camper, after a great effort, recovered the use of his tongue.

"It *is* Oscar Preston, as sure as I'm a sinner!" he exclaimed, in a hoarse whisper.

"Tom, is that you?" said Oscar, in the same husky voice.

Then there was silence. The two seemed to have been struck dumb again, and to be

utterly unable to remove their eyes from each other. But at length the camper slowly, inch by inch, brought himself into an upright position, and, moving with stealthy footsteps, and keeping his gaze fastened upon Oscar, as if he feared that the boy was an apparition that might vanish into thin air if he made the least noise or lost sight of him for an instant, he walked back to his log by the fire, and seating himself upon it, buried his face in his hands.

These actions aroused Oscar, who rode across the brook, and, after tying his pony to a convenient sapling, he went up to the log and seated himself beside the camper.

The latter did not notice him for several minutes ; but, at length, as if he began to feel ashamed of the weakness he had exhibited, he straightened himself up and looked defiantly into Oscar's face.

It was Tom Preston, sure enough (Oscar recognized him now, in spite of his whiskers), but how changed from the dashing, dandified book-keeper he had known at Eaton! He seemed to have grown ten years older since the day his brother last saw him.

CHAPTER VIII.

TOM PRESTON.

"TOM," said Oscar, as soon as he could speak, "you are the last person on earth I expected to meet in this wilderness."

"I may say the same in regard to yourself," answered Tom sullenly. "What brought you here?"

"I came on purpose to hunt."

"You *did?*"

Tom was greatly amazed when he heard this. He ran his eye over Oscar from head to foot, critically examining his neat, warm outfit, and noting, with no little bitterness of heart, the air of comfort and contentment which those who are prosperous in the world seem to carry with them wherever they go, and then he looked down at himself.

Oscar, following the direction of his gaze, saw that his suit of broadcloth was very seedy

and threadbare, and that in some places it was almost worn through.

What would Tom do when winter fairly set in, and the ravines were piled full of snow, and the keen winds came roaring down from the mountains? If that was the warmest suit he had, he would certainly freeze to death.

"Where is your overcoat?" asked Oscar, looking about the camp.

"Overcoat?" repeated Tom, with a sneering laugh. "Do you imagine that I am able to own such a thing? My uncle's got it."

"Your uncle?"

"Yes—Uncle Solomon, who lives in Denver. I had to shove it."

Oscar looked down at the ground, and turned these words over in his mind. He did not quite understand them, and yet he was almost afraid to ask Tom to explain.

He wanted to know all about his brother's circumstances and plans for the future, for he was as ready to assist him as he had been to assist Leon Parker; but still he did not like to ask too many questions, for Tom spoke very gruffly, and in a tone of voice which showed

that he was in no mood to say much about himself.

Finally, Oscar came to the conclusion that Tom, having become pressed for money, had been obliged to pawn his overcoat, and the latter's next words proved that this conclusion was the right one.

"The old skinflint took advantage of my necessities, as people of that class always do," said he. "He gave me only fifteen dollars for it, and it cost me forty. But those fifteen dollars came in very handy, I tell you, for with them I was able to purchase three flannel shirts and these boots, which are a mile too big for me. Now, let me tell you what's a fact, Oscar. You had better take the advice of one who has been through the mill, and dig out for the States while you have the chance. I was as spruce as you are when I first came out here, and now look at me. Just look at that!" he went on, thrusting out a foot which, up to the time he left home had always been encased in boots made of nothing heavier then French calf-skin or patent leather. "If I had been compelled to wear such stogas while I

was in Eaton, I should have thought I was very badly abused, but now I have to wear them, or go without any. I'll tell you another thing—if you stay here you needn't look to me for help. It is as much as I can do to take care of myself."

Here Tom got upon his feet and walked back and forth in front of his brother, shaking his fists in the air and swearing audibly.

"Those three thousand dollars didn't do you much good, did they?" said Oscar, after a moment's pause.

"Where did I get three thousand dollars?" demanded Tom, suddenly stopping in his walk and looking down at his brother.

"I am sure I don't know; but an examination of your accounts showed a deficit to that amount."

"Ah! That may be; but I didn't have any such sum when I came out here. I spent a good deal before I left Eaton."

"What did you do with the money you brought with you?" inquired Oscar, who hardly expected that Tom would reply to the question.

"Oh, I dropped it!"

"Did you lose it?"

Tom nodded his head, and resumed his walk.

"How did it happen?"

"Why, I was fool enough to buck the tiger down in Denver, if you must know," answered Tom snappishly. "I wanted to increase my capital, and the consequence was I lost it all."

"You don't mean to say that you gambled it away?" Oscar almost gasped.

"Well, that's about the plain English of it," was the careless reply.

"O Tom!" exclaimed Oscar. "What do you suppose mother would say if she knew it?"

"I don't intend that she shall know it, and she never will unless you get to swinging that long tongue of yours. It was my intention to shut myself out so completely from the world that nobody in Eaton would ever hear of me again; and I should have succeeded if some evil genius had not sent you prowling through this ravine. What brought you here, any-

way? I tell you again that I can't take care of you, and I won't, either! By the way, for how much did you get into old Smith?"

It was plain enough to be seen that Tom, in his endeavors to account for his brother's unexpected presence in that country, was shooting wide of the mark. He readily believed that Oscar, like himself, had stolen money from his employers and fled from Eaton in order to escape punishment at the hands of the law.

He could not think of anything else that would be likely to bring Oscar so far away from home.

"There's just one thing about it," said Tom to himself, after he had looked at the matter from all points and arrived at what he considered to be a perfectly satisfactory conclusion, "his money will soon be wasted—if it hasn't been wasted already—and now that he has found me, he will naturally expect me to help him; but I can't do it, and I won't, and he might as well know it first as last. How much money did you bring away from Eaton with you?" he asked aloud.

"About eleven hundred dollars," replied Oscar, who knew that his brother was very far from suspecting the real facts of the case. "And I left five hundred behind me."

"Good for you!" exclaimed Tom. "You made a bigger haul than I did. You kept that five hundred to fall back on, I suppose. I wish I had been sharp enough to do the same. What did you do with the rest?"

"I saved every cent of it, except what I was obliged to spend."

This answer almost took Tom's breath away, and caused him to make a radical change in the programme he had marked out for himself.

Oscar did not fail to see it all, for Tom's thoughts could be easily interpreted by the expression of his face.

"I don't gamble, you know, and neither am I given to drink," continued Oscar.

"Do you mean to say that I am?" demanded Tom, once more pausing in his walk.

"I do, for your face says so. No one ever saw a total abstainer with such eyes and such cheeks as you are carrying about with

you to-day. Now, Tom, it may be to your interest to tell me all about yourself. I arrived at the fort no longer ago than yesterday morning, but I have already started one disgusted runaway on the road toward home, and I am able to help you."

These words removed a heavy load of anxiety from Tom's mind. His brother was willing to help him.

He was very impatient to know how much help—in other words, how much money—Oscar would be likely to give him; but, for the moment, his curiosity overcame his greediness. He wanted to hear all about that runaway.

CHAPTER IX.

TOM'S STORY.

"WHAT was that runaway's name?" asked Tom. "Was he from Eaton?"

"He was, and his name was Leon Parker," replied Oscar. "He wasn't satisfied with as comfortable a home and as kind a father and mother as any boy ever had, so he ran away and came out here to be a hunter."

"Well, of all the born idiots I ever heard of, he is the beat!" exclaimed Tom, who could hardly believe his ears.

"That's my opinion exactly. If he could see you now, or if he could have seen the miserable being I met while I was riding through the sage-brush a little while ago, he would be——"

"While you were riding through the sage-brush!" interrupted Tom. "Did you come that way?"

"Yes; I came directly from the post, and

on the road I nearly ran over the meanest specimen of humanity my eyes ever rested upon. I tell you, I wouldn't like to meet him on a dark night, if I had anything about me that was worth stealing."

"Oh, he isn't as bad as he looks," said Tom.

"How do you know he isn't?" asked Oscar, who was greatly amazed. "It isn't possible that you are acquainted with him?"

"Yes, it is possible," replied Tom, turning away his head so that his brother might not see the hot blush of shame that momentarily overspread his features. "I know him, and, more than that, he is my partner. I am getting ready to start out with him."

"Worse and worse," said Oscar, who was utterly confounded. "Why, Tom, what in the world is going to become of you?"

"No preaching now!" was the angry rejoinder. "I had to put up with it from mother while I was at home, but I am not obliged to submit to it now, and I won't, either! If you want to talk business, go ahead; but if you want to preach, wait until some other time."

The words he had in his mind were:

"If you want to preach, clear out, and leave me as you found me."

But he recollected himself in time, and did not utter them.

Oscar had expressed a desire to assist him, and, consequently, it would not be wise to make him angry.

"You told me that you had already helped one runaway, and that you would help me," continued Tom, seating himself on the log by Oscar's side, and laying his hand familiarly on his shoulder. "Now, let's talk about that. How much are you going to give me, and how did you happen to strike it so rich? I mean, how did you manage to secure so large a haul and get away with it?" he added, seeing the inquiring look on his brother's face.

"Let me hear your story, and then you shall hear mine," answered Oscar. "Tell nothing but the truth, now. How came you in this fix?"

"Well, to make a long story short, I came out here with about fifteen hundred dollars in my pocket, intending to go to the mines, but—

unfortunately for me—I struck Denver on the way, and stayed there until I had squandered all my money. Then I had to go to work. A fellow can't live in this country without doing something to bring in the stamps, I tell you, for he has to pay two prices for all the necessaries of life.

"The first position I managed to work myself into was that of mule-whacker—teamster, you know; but I didn't understand the care of stock. I wasn't strong enough to handle the heavy boxes and bales of freight, and after one of the mules had kicked me over a few times, I became sick of the job, threw it up, and went back to Denver. Everything there was full—more applicants than there were places for them to fill.

"One day while I was wandering about the streets, waiting for something to turn up, I came across a college graduate who was sawing wood for his dinner. After a little talk with him, I made up my mind that I would have to come down to it, too, so I took in every job of that kind I could find, swept out saloons and stores—in fact, did anything that would bring

me money enough to pay for a decent meal once a day."

"Where did you sleep?" asked Oscar.

"In deserted shanties, principally," was the reply. "When I was hungry or thirsty, and couldn't find any way to earn money, I pawned some of the clothing I had purchased in St. Louis. At last I had nothing left but my overcoat, and I dared not think what I should do when that, too, was gone. But they say it is always darkest just before daylight, and, as it happened, I struck a lead just in the nick of time—struck it rich, too.

"While I was sweeping out a saloon to pay for my breakfast, this man—who is now my partner—came in for his regular eye-opener. After he had drank it, he fell into conversation with two or three fellows who were sitting around, and then I learned that he was a professional wolfer. He said that he had made thirty-five hundred dollars out of his last season's catch, and had come to the settlements to sell his plunder and have a good time. Having spent all his money, and winter being close at hand, he was getting ready to start out again.

All he lacked was a companion, but he couldn't find one.

"I don't know what it was that prompted me to follow him out of the saloon when he left, but I did it, and I tell you it was a most lucky thing for me. I told him that I didn't know anything about a wolfer's business, but I must do something to earn my grub and clothes, and offered, if he would take me with him and teach me the tricks of the trade, to give him one-third of my catch. He jumped at my offer, and here I am, *but* in this condition," said Tom, arising to his feet and turning his trousers' pockets inside out, to show that they were empty.

"I don't see that you have had any good luck yet," replied Oscar. "You seem to be completely strapped."

"So I am, but I consider myself very fortunate, all the same, for I am in a fair way to make a splendid living. Thirty-five hundred dollars in one season, and all the summer to rest in! Just think of it! Why, man alive, we'll be rich in five years! We'll have a cattle ranch of our own, live on the fat of the

land, and fairly roll in money!" cried Tom, trying in vain to infuse some of his bogus enthusiasm into his brother, who was not at all impressed by these visions of ease and wealth.

We said that Tom's enthusiasm was not genuine, and neither was it. It was assumed for a purpose, and Oscar knew what that purpose was before his brother's next words revealed it.

"Come to think it all over, I am heartily glad I met you," continued Tom. "Here we are, brothers, strangers in a strange land, and both in trouble. Our interests are identical. Two can do more than one, and we ought by all means to hang together. You must have seven or eight hundred dollars, haven't you?"

"Yes, I have that much."

"Can you get hold of that five hundred you left behind?"

"I suppose I can, but I don't want it."

"Oh, we shall need it, sooner or later, and you might as well make arrangements accordingly. That makes twelve or thirteen hundred dollars that we are sure of. Now I'll tell

you what we'll do. We'll go halves on that, and I will drop my old partner and take you in his place. What do you say?"

Oscar did not say anything immediately. His brother's proposition was rather more than he had bargained for. This was the point Tom had been trying to reach ever since he found out that Oscar had money in his possession. The latter had seen it very plainly, and knew that the matter must at some time be thoroughly discussed, and Tom be given to understand that his offer of partnership could not be entertained. He knew, too, that there would be an explosion when the denouement came, and Tom learned how sadly he had been mistaken in regard to some things, and for this reason Oscar was anxious to put the critical moment off as long as he could.

CHAPTER X.

TOM LEARNS SOMETHING.

"WHAT do you think of my plan, anyhow?" asked Tom. "Isn't it glorious?"

"I would rather know what *you* think of it when you have heard my story, which I will begin as soon as you have finished yours," answered Oscar. "You have not yet given me any idea of your business. Where's your home?"

"Haven't got any. Don't need one."

"How did you come up from Denver?"

"Walked every step of the way, and my partner's pony carried the plunder."

"He didn't have to overtax his strength, did he?" said Oscar, looking at the battered coffeepot in the brook, which was the only thing in the shape of "plunder" or luggage that he had seen in the camp, if we except the axe which rested on the other end

of the log that served them for a seat. "Where is your rifle?"

"Don't need that, either, although I confess it would be a nice thing to have at hand in case of trouble. My partner has one, and I was going to depend on him to supply our larder and keep us in bait. I suppose you have firearms?"

"Yes; I have a rifle, revolver, and shot-gun."

"All right. We are well provided for in that line, but strychnine is what we shall depend on, so don't forget to lay in a good supply of it when you go back to the village. Before you go I will tell you what else we need, and bright and early to-morrow morning we'll set out. When we reach a country in which wolves are known to be plenty, we'll make a camp, and go to work at once. The first thing will be to procure bait, which may be anything in the shape of fresh meat that comes in our way. The skin we shall save, of course; but the meat will be cut up into pieces, sprinkled with strychnine, and scattered about over

the snow. The next morning we'll go out and bring in our dead wolves. The skins will be taken off and cured, and the carcasses will serve as bait for other wolves."

"You will need warmer clothes than those you have on, if you are going to be exposed to the weather," said Oscar.

"I know it; and I shall depend on you to buy some for me. I shall soon be able to repay you, for there is money in this business. Everybody says so."

"I am glad of it, and since you seem determined to go into it, I hope you will be successful. If you are, you can return Mr. Smith's money with legal interest."

Oscar watched his brother narrowly as he uttered these words, and was not much surprised at the effect they produced upon him.

Tom jumped to his feet, and doubling up his fists, began flourishing them in the air over his head, preparatory to saying something emphatic. Then, suddenly recollecting himself, he dropped his hands by his side, and took his seat on the log again.

"I can do that, can't I?" said he, with a great show of earnestness, which, like the enthusiasm he had exhibited a few minutes before, was all "put on" for the occasion. "It would restore me to my old standing in society, wouldn't it?"

"No, it wouldn't, although it would go a long way toward it. It is, in fact, the very first step you must take if you want to regain the confidence of the folks in Eaton. There is a stain upon your character, and you must live it down. That's what I had to do."

"You! My conduct didn't affect you in any way."

"I should say it did, and in more ways than one. Mr. Smith discharged me because he was afraid to trust me, and that is what brought me out here. You remember how much sport you used to make of my taxidermy, don't you? Well, it is now bringing me in a hundred dollars a month, clear of all expenses. I received enough in advance to make mother comfortable a long time, and a thousand dollars besides with which to pay my bills."

"Why, what do you mean?" exclaimed

Tom, who was quite as much astonished as Oscar expected him to be.

"I mean just what I say. I have a life position, if I succeed in satisfying my employers, with the promise of a big increase in my salary. I may go to Africa after I get through here on the plains."

"Oh, now, leave off chaffing me!" said Tom impatiently. "I am in no humor for nonsense."

"It is not nonsense. I will tell you all about it, and when you have heard my story, you are at liberty to think what you please."

Oscar then went on to describe, in as few words as possible, all the incidents which had operated to make so great a change in his circumstances.

He told the story of his discharge from the store, of the vindication of his character by the discovery of the thief who had been systematically robbing the money-drawer (Oscar did not yet know that his friends, Sam Hynes and Miles Jackson, had anything to do with that affair), and of Mr. Smith's efforts to

induce him to return to his old situation at an increased salary.

He told how he and Sam Hynes had rescued Professor Potter when the latter was capsized off the head of Squaw Island, and wound up his narrative by giving the details of his visit to Yarmouth, and his employment by the committee who controlled the immense fund which was to be expended in adding a museum to the university.

Tom listened in genuine amazement; and, by the time the story was finished, he was so angry that he could scarcely breathe.

He would have been glad, indeed, if he could have disbelieved every word his brother uttered, but his story bore the impress of truth upon the face of it.

We know how he had accounted for Oscar's presence there on the plains, and he had fairly rejoiced in the belief that his brother was a runaway thief like himself.

Misery loves company, you know, and Tom found great satisfaction in the thought that Oscar, whom everybody in Eaton believed to be strictly honest and truthful,

had at last yielded to temptation and sunk to a level as low as that which he himself occupied. But, when the real facts of the case were revealed—when Tom learned that his brother had left home in broad daylight, and with his mother's full and free consent; that he was backed up by a committee worth a hundred thousand dollars, and provided with letters that would place him on terms of intimacy with the highest officers on the plains, both civil and military; that those officers would give him a good "send-off," and stand ready at all times to assist him by every means in their power—when Tom thought of all these things, his rage got the better of him, and he jumped to his feet with the wildest kind of a warwhoop.

"Have you got the impudence to come here and tell me that you are growing rich every day, while I am freezing and starving?" he demanded, in a voice which was rendered almost indistinct by intense passion.

"I tell you that I have a steady income, and it is the truth," replied Oscar.

"And you never stole any of old Smith's money?"

"Of course not. I never handled a dishonest penny in my life."

"And do you know that while you were comfortably housed at the fort last night, and having a good time with those officers, who wouldn't look at me any sooner than they would look at a yellow dog—do you know that while you were enjoying yourself in that way, I was sitting shivering over this camp fire, with nothing but hardtack to eat, and nobody but an ignorant, ragged backwoodsman for company? Do you know it?" yelled Tom, who hardly realized what he said in the excess of his fury. "What do you mean by it? and what amends are you going to make for treating me so?"

"I don't know that I can make you any amends," said Oscar, who was greatly astonished. "You surely can't expect me to come out here and shiver over a miserable camp fire, and take a ragged backwoodsman for a companion, just because you choose to do so!"

"You know well enough that I didn't mean that!" Tom almost shrieked. "Why didn't you do something for me?"

"I didn't know you were here."

"And it would have made no difference if you had known it. But that's always the way. Those who are lucky don't care a straw for those that are unlucky. The harder a fellow tries to better his condition in life the worse he is off. There is no one who has planned and schemed more than I have to make money, and now look at me! You, on the contrary, took matters easily, and Fortune has showered favors on you by the bucketful. You will go off to the hills with a guide, provisions, and clothing in abundance, and everything else that will enable you to live in camp as comfortably as you would at home, while I——"

Tom was too angry to say more just then. He walked back and forth in front of his brother, shaking his fists in the air and swearing at the top of his voice.

CHAPTER XI.

TOM BECOMES DESPERATE.

"LOOK here," said Tom, suddenly pausing in his walk and looking down at his brother. "The fact that you came honestly by your money will not interfere with our arrangement, will it?"

"I know what you mean, of course," answered Oscar, "but I can't consent to it. My instructions are most explicit, and the money I shall spend is not my own."

"What's the odds? Who'll know whether you obey orders or not? How much are you to pay your guide?"

"A dollar and a half a day from the time we leave the fort until we get back."

"Well, you will save all that by taking me in his place; and that consideration ought to have some weight with you, if you are as careful of the committee's money as you pretend to be. When you go back to the post, tell him

that you don't want him—that you have made other arrangements—and be ready to meet me in the sage-brush to-morrow at sunrise. I shall want a pony, of course, and while you are about it you might as well bring me a rifle and a supply of ammunition. In the meantime, I will shake my partner, and we'll set out together. When we find a place that suits us, we'll go into camp, and while you are securing specimens I will put in the time in catching wolves. What do you say to it?"

"I say that there are many objections to your plan," replied Oscar. "In the first place, my instructions are to hire a guide, and I have done so. If I should discharge Big Thompson, now that I have engaged him——"

"Big Thompson?" interrupted Tom. "He isn't your guide, I hope?"

"He is; and he was recommended to me by the colonel commanding the post."

"I don't care who recommended him, he's a rascal."

"Do you know him?" asked Oscar.

"Not personally; but my partner does, and he doesn't know any good of him, either. I

wouldn't pass a minute alone in the hills with him for all the money there is in the States."

Oscar called to mind the kindly face of his guide, and the clear, honest-looking eyes which had gazed straight into his own whenever their owner spoke to him, and contrasted the man to whom that face and those eyes belonged with the sneaking ruffian he had met in the sage-brush; and the conclusion at which he arrived was that there was nothing in the world that would induce him to change companions with Tom.

Before he would do that he would throw up his situation and look about for some other occupation that would support himself and his mother.

Believing that Tom's "partner" had some good cause for hating Big Thompson, Oscar said no more about him, but went on to state the other objections he had to Tom's plan.

"Another reason why I can't agree to your proposal is that I am working on a salary, and I am in duty bound to do the best I can for those who employ me," said he. "What could you and I accomplish by roaming about

among the hills without an experienced hunter to show us where the game is? You would catch no wolves, and I should find no specimens."

"Yes, we would, for game of all kinds is so abundant that we couldn't run amiss of it," answered Tom.

Without stopping to argue this point, Oscar continued:

"There is still another reason. I am only on probation now, and unless I can show that committee that I am a hunter as well as a taxidermist, I shall have to step aside and give place to somebody else. You can see for yourself that it is to my interest to do the best I can at the start."

"You seem to be full of excuses, but you needn't offer any more," said Tom, with suppressed rage. "If you don't want to agree to my proposal, say it in so many words."

"I don't want to agree to your proposal," returned Oscar. "I can't.

"You were ready enough to help Leon, who is nothing to you, and who did his

best to injure you in every possible way while you lived in Eaton!" sneered Tom; "but when your brother asks you for a lift, you refuse to raise a finger. Lend me a hundred dollars to buy an outfit with. Can you do that?"

"No, I can't. I haven't got the money."

"There! What did I tell you?" Tom almost shouted. "A little while ago you said you had a thousand dollars."

"But it doesn't belong to me. I have to use it in paying my expenses."

"And Leon's too!" exclaimed Tom. "You must have paid his stage and railroad fare out of that fund."

"I did; but I shall have to replace it out of my own pocket."

"You couldn't lend me a hundred dollars, and replace it in the same way, I suppose?"

"No, I could not, for two reasons: In the first place, that mortgage must be paid, so that mother can be sure of a home of her own; and in the next, I don't know how much money I shall need this winter. I must

feed my guide as well as myself, and when we come back to the fort I must pay him cash in hand for his services. Then I have a pony, mule, and wagon to buy, and it will cost a snug sum to transport myself and the specimens I hope to procure to Eaton. Wouldn't I be in a pretty fix if I should find my money was running short?"

"You could draw on that committee for more, couldn't you?"

"No, I couldn't. That wasn't in the bargain."

"What's the odds? Take the risk. Tell them that you were robbed, or that your expenses were a little heavier than you thought they would be."

"I'll not tell a lie to please anybody," said Oscar indignantly.

"Of course not! *Of* course not!" yelled Tom, who was so nearly beside himself with fury that he could not stand still even for a moment. "You were quite willing to help a boy who has slandered you, and to work yourself to death in order to win the approbation of strangers, but you wouldn't give your

needy brother fifteen cents to save him from starving."

"I'll tell you what I will do," said Oscar, paying no heed to Tom's remarks. "I will give you a suit of warm clothing and an overcoat, if you will accept them."

It was right on the point of Tom's tongue to tell Oscar to bundle up that suit of warm clothing and the overcoat, and take them to Guinea, or some other place under the equator—not because he did not need the clothing, but because he wanted money more, and it made him angry to know that he could not get it.

If Oscar had been able to comply with his demands, every cent would have been squandered, and his brother would have started out in his threadbare suit to face the winter's storms.

Tom did not utter the words that arose to his lips. He paced back and forth for some minutes, with his eyes fastened on the ground, when suddenly a daring project suggested itself to him.

Without stopping to dwell on it, he strode

up and faced his brother. There was a wild look in his eyes, and his fingers worked convulsively.

"How much money have you got in your pocket?" he asked, in as steady a tone as he could command.

"Not a red cent," was the reply. "I left it all at the fort. I thought it would be safer there."

"And I wasn't mistaken, either," said Oscar, to himself, as he looked up at his brother. "No honest face ever wore an expression like that. I think I would be safer at the fort myself."

Tom could not meet his brother's gaze. He turned away his head and resumed his seat on the log.

Oscar had never before come so near being robbed as he had that day. Tom was really in terrible straits, and so very much in need of money that he would not have hesitated to knock his brother senseless, if he had been sure that by so doing he could secure possession of his well-filled pocket-book.

If the latter had not been thoughtful enough

to place all his money in his trunk before setting out on his ride, there would have been a desperate battle on the banks of that little stream; and it is possible that before it was ended Tom would have discovered that he had undertaken more than he could accomplish.

He was much larger and heavier than his brother, and plumed himself on being a boxer, but he was weakened and dispirited, by long-continued dissipation, while Oscar, having lived a strictly temperate life, was always in condition to do his best.

"Don't you think it about time to turn over a new leaf?" asked Oscar, as he arose to his feet and laid his hand on his brother's shoulder. "One is getting pretty near the end of his rope when he can bring himself to think seriously of committing such a crime as you had in contemplation a few minutes ago."

Tom did not raise his head or utter a sound. He could not find words with which to deny the accusation.

CHAPTER XII.

OSCAR TALKS TO THE COLONEL.

"WHAT shall I do with the clothes?" continued Oscar. "Shall I bring them to you, or would you rather go up to the sutler's and pick them out for yourself?"

"I'd rather you would bring them to me," answered Tom, without looking at his brother. "Bring them to the mouth of the ravine, and I will meet you there—say in a couple of hours. You had better not come in here again, for my partner is an odd sort of a fellow, and doesn't like to have any strangers about his camp. If I shouldn't happen to be on hand when you come back, don't wait for me. Just hide the clothes in the bushes at the foot of a big rock you will see there, and I'll find them. You will know what rock I mean when you see it, for there is a large oak tree leaning over it. Good-by till I see you again."

While Oscar was listening to what his brother

had to say in regard to the disposal of the clothing, something told him that Tom did not intend to be at the place appointed to receive them.

Impressed with this idea, and believing that it would be a long time before he would meet him again,—if, indeed, he ever met him,—he resolved to extort from him a promise that he would not only withdraw from the companionship of such men as the one he had seen in the sage-brush, but that he would make an honest and persevering effort to refund the money he had stolen, and regain a place among reputable people. But he did not have time to say a word, for Tom's good-by was an abrupt dismissal.

That he intended it should be taken as such was proved by his actions. As soon as he ceased speaking, he caught up the axe and plunged into the bushes.

"Don't leave me in that way. I want to say something more to you," cried Oscar.

He listened intently for a reply, but the only one he received was the echo of his own voice thrown back from the cliffs.

He called again, with no better success, and then, unhitching his pony, he sprang upon his back, and slowly and sadly rode down the ravine.

He turned in his saddle occasionally, to run his eye over the thicket in which Tom had disappeared ; but he could see nothing of him, and finally a sudden turn in the road shut the camp out from his view.

The exhilarating gallop Oscar had enjoyed on his new pony had done much to cure his homesickness and banish the gloomy thoughts that had crowded upon him when he saw Leon Parker setting out for the States ; but the events of the last half hour had brought them all back again.

He had never dreamed that he would stumble upon his brother in that wilderness, or that he would ever see him in a condition so deplorable.

Tom's ill-gotten gains, which he had expected would bring him so much happiness, had brought him nothing but misery. He was thinly clad, his pockets were empty, he had often gone hungry, and he was the com-

panion and associate of the lowest characters.

"His case certainly looks desperate," thought Oscar, glancing at his watch and putting his pony into a gallop, "and I am completely at my wit's end. I don't know what to do, and I wish there was someone here to whom I could go for advice. Tom will never be anything better than he is while he remains with such fellows as that 'partner' of his, that's certain; but how shall I get him away from them? That's the question that troubles me."

And we may add that it troubled him all the way to the fort; but just as he was riding into the gate a thought passed through his mind, inducing him to turn his pony toward the stable instead of toward the hitching-post in front of the commandant's headquarters, as he had at first intended to do. If anybody could help him it was the colonel.

He would not take the officer into his confidence, of course, but he would question him in a roundabout way, and perhaps during the conversation some hint would be dropped that would show him a way out of his difficulty.

Leaving his pony in the stall that had been set apart for his use, Oscar walked across the parade-ground and entered the hall leading to the colonel's quarters, the orderly, as before, opening the door for him. He was glad to find that the officer was alone. He was engaged in writing, but when Oscar came in he laid down his pen and greeted him with :

"Ah! you have turned up at last, have you? I have had an orderly looking for you, thinking that perhaps you would like to take a short ride to try your new horse."

"I have just returned from a five-mile gallop," answered Oscar, who hoped that the colonel would not offer to accompany him when he left the fort to carry the clothes to the ravine. "I am going to start right back, and this time I shall take my gun with me. I saw some grouse and a big jack-rabbit down there in the sage-brush."

"Oh, you can find them any day if you keep your eyes open," said the colonel carelessly. "But I suppose you might as well begin to form your collection one time as another. How does your pony suit?"

"Very well so far. He showed a disposition to be ugly at first, but I had no trouble to bring him to his senses. By-the-way, I met a couple of wolfers while I was gone."

"Well, what did they steal from you?"

"Nothing, sir. The only thing I had with me that was worth stealing was my pony. No doubt you will be surprised when I tell you that one of these wolfers is an old acquaintance of mine."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed the colonel, who was indeed surprised. "You beat anybody I ever heard of. How many more acquaintances are you going to find while you are out here? Are you going to ship this fellow off to the States, too?"

"No, sir; because he can't very well—I mean he doesn't want to go back where he came from," stammered Oscar, who was not a little confused when he found that he had let out more than he had intended.

"*Ah!*" said the colonel in a very significant tone of voice. "It is a wonder you met him at all, for these wolfers generally have good reasons for keeping themselves hidden in the

thickest part of the woods they can find. If you have cause to dislike this man—whoever he is—you may have the satisfaction of knowing that he can't get any lower down in the world—not by land, as some humorist remarks."

"I have no cause to dislike him," replied Oscar. "On the contrary, I think a good deal of him; but I do not like the company he keeps. I met his partner while I was riding through the sage-brush, and I must say that he was the worst specimen of humanity that I ever looked at. He was tall and raw-boned, with grizzly hair and whiskers, a pair of wild-looking eyes——"

"And rode a little sorrel pony, with a sheepskin for a saddle," added the colonel. "That was Lish, the Wolfer. I know him. Where is he now?"

"In the village, probably. I judge so, from the fact that, when I met him, he carried a couple of empty sacks across his pony's neck. I thought he was going after supplies."

"Where did you find his companion?"

"In camp, on the banks of the brook that runs through the ravine, about——"

"Orderly, tell Lieutenant Fitch I want to see him!" shouted the colonel.

Oscar was very much surprised at this unceremonious interruption, and he was still more surprised, and not a little alarmed, besides, when the lieutenant—who happened to be close at hand—entered the room in haste, and was thus addressed by his superior:

"Mr. Fitch," said the colonel, "Lish, the Wolfer, has been in Julesburg. How long ago was it you met him?" he added, turning to Oscar.

"About two hours, I should say."

"Well, he has had plenty of time to get drunk. Go and find him, Mr. Fitch, and listen to what he has to say. When he is in his cups, he is like an Indian in the war-dance—much given to boasting of his valorous deeds. If he says anything relating to that affair of last summer, take him into custody at once, and then go up and arrest his companion, whom you will find on the banks of that little trout-stream we fished in last sum-

mer. If one had a hand in it, the other did, too, and so we must pull them both."

Having received his instructions, the lieutenant hurried from the room, while Oscar sank helplessly back in his chair, almost overcome with bewilderment and alarm.

"Worse and worse," he thought, when he had recovered himself so that he could think at all. "Tom has been doing something else that renders him liable to arrest. What will become of him?"

Then, seeing that the colonel's eyes were fastened upon him with an inquiring look, he called a sickly smile to his face, and asked, in a voice that was strangely calm, considering the circumstances:

"Are the wolfers all bad men?"

"Oh, no. There are exceptions, of course; but take them as a class, they are a desperate lot. I know of several men, two of whom I have in my mind at this moment, who made their start in life as wolfers. One of them is now a prosperous merchant in an Eastern city, and the other is running an extensive cattle ranch in Texas. But they were careful of

their money, while the majority of those who follow that business squander every cent they earn. They brave hunger, cold, and all sorts of hardships for several months in the year, and devote the rest of their time to getting rid of their money. They are held in supreme contempt by all honest plainsmen, and this acquaintance of yours had better break off associating with them before he gets himself into trouble, if he hasn't done so already. If he is going to be a wolfer, he had better hunt alone than in the company of that miserable fellow he seems to have chosen for a companion. No matter how much money he makes, Lish will find means to obtain possession of the whole of it."

"Do you think he will rob him?" exclaimed the boy.

"He is capable of anything," was the colonel's reply.

And it was accompanied by a shrug of the shoulders that spoke volumes and excited a train of serious reflections in Oscar's mind.

CHAPTER XIII.

OSCAR WRITES A NOTE.

WHILE the colonel was speaking, Oscar had twisted uneasily about on his chair, waiting with the utmost impatience for him to bring his remarks to a close.

At almost any other time he would have plied the officer with questions regarding the class of nomads known as "wolfers," for he would like to have learned more about them; but he had already found out all he cared to know just then.

Tom was suspected of complicity in some crime that rendered him liable to punishment; and, if he escaped and went to the hills with Lish, he would run the risk of being robbed by him.

Oscar thought it was his duty to warn him of these dangers. He knew that the lieutenant would carry out his instructions with the

utmost promptness and decision—these regulars waste no time when acting under orders—and not a moment was to be lost.

The colonel settled back in his chair as though he had nothing more to say just then, and Oscar arose to his feet and went into his bedroom.

After slinging on his powder-flask and shot-pouch, and making sure that the little box in the stock of his fowling-piece was filled with caps, he opened his trunk, and, taking from it a sum of money sufficient to pay for the clothes he had promised to purchase for his brother, he went back into the colonel's room.

There the officer detained him for a few minutes in order to describe the localities in the immediate vicinity of the fort in which he would be likely to find the most game, and to tell him how to shape his course in order to reach those localities. He thought he was doing the boy a kindness; but instead of that he was putting him on nettles.

Oscar listened as patiently as he could; and, when the colonel ceased speaking, he bade him good-by and left the room.

He bolted through the outer door, and ran at the top of his speed across the parade-ground to the sutler's store. Fortunately there were no customers present, and so the sutler was at liberty to attend to his wants at once.

Slinging his double-barrel over his shoulder by the broad strap that was attached to it, Oscar quickly selected the articles he thought his brother needed, paid the price demanded for them, and, as soon as they had been tied up in a compact bundle, he hurried to the stable after his horse.

The animal, as before, showed a desire to use his heels, but Oscar, having no time to waste, paid not the slightest attention to him. The curb and the rawhide lasso were both brought into requisition; and, before the vicious little beast was fairly through smarting under the energetic pulls and blows he had received, he had carried his rider through the gate and out of sight of the flag-staff.

The pony accomplished the distance that lay between the fort and the mouth of the gully in much less time than he had accomplished it before; for Oscar made no effort to

check him, not even when he was moving with headlong speed down the steep path that led through the sage-brush.

Almost before he knew it, the boy found himself in the mouth of the ravine, and there he drew rein and brought his pony to a stand-still.

He now had another cause for uneasiness. Suppose the lieutenant had found Lish at the village, and that the wolfer had said or done something to warrant his arrest! Suppose, too, having placed Lish safely in the guard-house, the young officer should come after Tom, and find Oscar there in the ravine!

Even if he did not suspect him of something—and it is hard to see how the lieutenant could help it when he caught sight of the big bundle that was tied to the horn of Oscar's saddle—would he not mention the circumstance to the colonel when he made his report, and wouldn't the colonel have a word or two to say about it?

"Gracious!" exclaimed Oscar; "I'll be in trouble myself if I don't look out. What could I say to the colonel if he should ask me

what I was doing here, and what I had in my bundle? Tom!" he added, calling as loudly as he dared. "If you are about here, show yourself without any fooling. I am in a great hurry, and I have news for you."

Tom *was* about there, but he would not show himself. He was lying at the foot of a scrub-oak, on the other side of the ravine, keeping a close watch over his brother's movements; but not even the announcement that Oscar had some news to communicate, could induce him to stir from his place of concealment. He felt so heartily ashamed of himself that he did not want to meet his brother face to face again, if he could help it.

"I can't waste any words on him. There are his clothes, and when he wants them he can come after them," said Oscar, pitching the bundle down behind the rock Tom had described to him. "Now then, I don't know whether or not I shall have time to do it, but I'll take the risk."

So saying, Oscar drew from his pocket a diary and lead-pencil, and dashed off a short

note to his brother, using the pommel of his saddle for a writing-desk. The pony was as motionless as the rock beside which he stood.

Probably he thought—if he was able to think at all—that Oscar had ridden into the bushes in order to conceal himself from some enemy who was in pursuit of him. At any rate, he showed the training he had received at the hands of his Indian master.

The note ran as follows:

DEAR TOM:

Here are the clothes you need. I am sorry I cannot see you again, for I should like to ask you some questions in regard to a certain "affair" that happened last summer; and in which you and Lish, the Wolfer, are supposed to have been engaged. If you had anything to do with it, you will know what I mean, and you had better dig out of here without the loss of a minute's time. Go off somewhere among white folks; begin all over again, with an earnest resolution to do better, and, as soon as you are able, make amends for what you have done. But first drop Lish, as you would drop a hot potato. You will never amount to a row of pins so long as you have anything to do with him or men like him. I have as good evidence as I want that he will rob you before the season is over, as Frank Fuller and Eben Webster robbed Leon Parker. If you had no hand in that "affair," whatever it may be, come up to the fort as

soon as you have read this note and put on these clothes, and I will do everything in my power to give you a start. In either case drop Lish. It would be better for you to work for nothing and board around, as you did in Denver, than to associate longer with him.

For prudential reasons, Oscar signed no name to the note; and, indeed, no signature was needed to tell Tom where it came from. He read it over hastily, and bending down from his saddle, he thrust it under the string with which the bundle of clothing was tied up.

"It isn't as emphatic as I wish it was," thought he, "but I have no time to re-write it, and I don't know that I could make any improvements in it if I should try. I would much rather talk to him, and I wish he had——"

Just then the pony's head came up with a jerk, and his ears were thrown back as if he were listening to some sound behind him.

He did not turn about as most horses would have done, nor did he move one of his feet an inch—not even when the clatter of hoofs on the hard path began to ring out clearly and distinctly, as it did a moment later.

Somebody was coming through the sage-brush toward the ravine—that was evident. Beyond a doubt it was the lieutenant; and here was Oscar, fairly cornered.

A person thinks rapidly when placed in a situation like this, and it did not take the boy an instant to make up his mind that everything depended on his pony.

The rock behind which he had hidden the bundle stood on the hillside, fully twenty feet from the path, and the intervening space was thickly covered with trees and bushes.

If the pony could be kept from revealing his presence, it was possible that the approaching horseman might pass on into the ravine, without suspecting that there was anyone near him.

"It's rather a slender chance," Oscar thought, as he swung himself from the saddle and seized his pony by the bit; "but it is the only one I have. Now, old fellow," he added in a whisper, "just imagine that I am an Indian hiding here to escape from a white man who wants to shoot me!"

If the pony had been able to understand

every word his master said to him, he could not have behaved with more circumspection.

He stood perfectly still, and there was nothing but the motion of his ears to indicate that he heard anything.

Oscar kept a close watch of the path through a convenient opening in the bushes, and presently the horseman passed across the range of his vision.

CHAPTER XIV.

LEFT IN THE SAGE-BRUSH.

THE opening in the bushes was so small that Oscar was able to obtain but a momentary glimpse of the passing horseman, but that momentary glimpse was enough to satisfy him on two points. It was not the lieutenant, after all, but Lish, the Wolfer, and he had not been to the village for the purpose of getting drunk, as the colonel had intimated, but to lay in some necessary supplies in the way of provisions. The well-filled bags that were slung across his pony's neck, and the side of bacon which hung from the muzzle of the long rifle he carried over his shoulder testified to this fact.

Oscar drew a long breath of relief when he saw the man ride down the path, and told himself that one thing was certain: If Tom was determined to go with the wolfer he would

have something to eat during the journey to his hunting-grounds, and if he went hungry after that, it would be because his partner was too lazy to keep the larder supplied with meat.

As soon as the wolfer had passed out of hearing Oscar mounted his pony and rode down into the path. He made his way around the brow of the hill; and, when he had put a safe distance between himself and the mouth of the ravine, he checked his pony and proceeded to load his gun.

"Tom has got the matter in his own hands," said he, as he rested the butt of the weapon on the toe of his boot and poured a charge of powder into each barrel. "If he had nothing to do with that 'affair' that happened last summer—I wish to goodness I knew what it was—and has any desire to turn over a new leaf and to go to work in earnest, he will come up to the fort as soon as he has read that note. If he does not come I shall have to look upon his absence either as a confession of guilt, or as a declaration that he prefers the companionship of such men as that wolfer to the society of honest folks. In

either case I have done all I can, and the business ends right here so far as I am concerned."

Oscar would have been very much surprised if anyone had told him that he had not seen the end of the business after all; that, in fact, he had seen only the beginning of it.

The note he had written, as well as the clothing he had purchased to keep Tom from freezing, were destined at no distant day to be produced as evidence against him.

Was it a dread of impending evil that prompted him to say, as he placed the caps on his gun and started his pony forward again:

"Mr. Chamberlain was always right, and he shot close to the mark when he told me that I would not find plain sailing before me, simply because I was about to engage in a congenial occupation. I have been at the fort but a few hours, and yet I have wished myself back in Eaton more than a dozen times. Why didn't I keep away from that ravine? Thoughts of Tom will force themselves upon me continually, and all my pleasure will be knocked in the head. How can I enjoy myself when I know that he is in such a situa-

tion? Hold on there! I am ready for you now!"

Although he was deeply engrossed in his meditations, Oscar could still keep an eye out for game; and when that flock of sage-hens arose from the bushes almost at his pony's feet, they did not catch him napping.

Being accustomed to the noise made by the grouse of his native hills when it suddenly bursts from its cover, the sound of their wings did not startle him as it startles the tyro.

He was so excited that he did not think to stop his pony, but still he was cool enough to make his selections before he fired; and when he saw, through the thick cloud of smoke that poured from each barrel, two little patches of feathers floating in the air, and marking the spot where a brace of the finest members of the flock had been neatly stopped in their rapid flight, he knew that his ammunition had not been expended in vain.

There was another thing Oscar did not think of, and that was whether or not his pony would stand fire. But it was now too late to debate that question, and besides, it had been settled

to his entire satisfaction. Almost simultaneously with the quick reports of the fowling-piece there arose other sounds of an entirely different character—a crashing in the bushes, followed by muffled exclamations of astonishment and anger. These sounds were made by Oscar, who had been very neatly unhorsed.

The pony would no doubt stand fire well enough to suit his half-savage, rough-riding Indian master, but he was not steady enough to suit the young taxidermist.

When the double-barrel roared almost between his ears, his head went down, his hind feet came up, and Oscar, being taken off his guard, went whirling through the air as if he had been thrown from a catapult.

He lost no time in scrambling to his feet, but he was too late to catch his pony. All he saw of him was the end of his tail, which was flourishing triumphantly in the breeze as the tricky little beast went out of sight over the brow of the hill.

"Well, go if you want to!" shouted Oscar, holding one hand to his head, and rubbing his shoulder with the other. "You'll never come

that on me again, I tell you. I can hunt just as well on foot. Now, where's my gun?"

The weapon had been pitched into a thick bush, a short distance in advance of the one in which Oscar had brought up, and fortunately it had sustained no injury beyond a few deep scratches in the stock, which Oscar tried to rub out with the sleeve of his coat.

The boy's first care was to put fresh loads into each barrel, and his second to hunt up his specimens, which he found to be perfect in every way.

After examining them to his satisfaction, he placed them in a couple of paper cones which he had taken the precaution to put into his game-bag before leaving the fort, and then set out in search of the jack-rabbit he had seen a few hours before.

He did not waste any time in looking for his pony, for he knew that all efforts to recapture him would be unavailing. The animal would no doubt make the best of his way back to the corral from which he had been taken in the

morning, and Oscar would find him there when he returned to the fort.

If he ever got on his back again, he would teach him that he was expected to halt the instant he saw his rider raise a gun to his face, and give him to understand, besides, that any and every attempt to throw that rider would be sure to bring a certain and speedy punishment.

The young hunter walked up and down the ridge several times, carefully beating the cover on each side of the path, but he could not make the jack-rabbit, or any member of his family, show himself.

Probably there were plenty of his species running about in the brush, within easy range, or hiding away in secure retreats, listening to the sound of his footsteps ; but he had no dog to drive them out into the open so that he could get a shot at them. How Bugle would have enjoyed an hour's run in that thicket !

Becoming weary of the hunt at last, Oscar looked at his watch, felt of his head—which must have been pretty severely bumped, judg-

ing by the way it ached—and drew a bee-line for the post.

Tom had been allowed ample time to read the note and put on the clothes that had been provided for him ; and, if he thought it best to come up to the fort, Oscar wanted to be on hand to meet him. It was near the hour of dress-parade, too.

As soon as that was over, and supper had been served, the officers who were to compose the hunting expedition were to be ready for the start.

Oscar knew that the hunt had been planned solely for his own benefit, and since the colonel had shown him so much courtesy, it would not do for him to be a minute behind time.

There was a vast difference, Oscar found, in traveling over two miles and a half of prairie on a swift and willing horse, and walking the same distance when one has an aching head on his shoulders and a fowling-piece to carry, even though it does weigh but little over seven pounds.

It seemed a long way from the sage-brush to the fort, but he reached his journey's end at

last, and just in time to see the companies fall in for dress-parade.

From the top of the hill on which the fort was located, Oscar witnessed, for the first time, this imposing ceremony, which took place on a level plain a short distance away.

It consisted principally of a short exercise in the manual of arms, the reception of the reports of the first sergeants, and the publication of the latest orders.

There were eight companies in line, and every one of them was composed entirely of well-dressed veterans. There was not a man in the ranks who had not heard the war-whoop, and joined in headlong charges against the hostile Sioux.

They presented a fine appearance as they sat there in their saddles, the rays of the declining sun glancing from their bright weapons and burnished accoutrements, every man's arm and body moving as one, in obedience to the sharp words of command. As Oscar looked at them his heart thrilled, and he wished that he was a soldier himself.

This wish he communicated to a young

second lieutenant, Joel Warwick by name, who was to be one of the hunting party, and who joined him as soon as the parade was dismissed.

The officer stared at Oscar a moment, as if to assure himself that he was really in earnest, and then astonished him by saying :

"I would change places with you to-day, if I could, and give you boot into the bargain. You see us now in our Sunday clothes, and you think we look nice. So we do ; for there's not a finer sight to be seen in this world than a battalion of cavalry drawn up in line, unless it be that same battalion making a charge. But you ought to see us and our clothes after a hard scout !"

"Well, you don't go on scout every day," said Oscar. "Besides, you have a life position ; you get good pay for what you do, and there are your chances for promotion. You'll be a colonel yourself some day."

"Not much. We go by the seniority rule in peace times, and there are a good many on the list above me, I tell you. Nothing but a war that will kill off some of my seniors will advance me."

CHAPTER XV.

THE HUNTING PARTY.

JOEL WARWICK was a dashing young officer, proud of his chosen profession, and anxious for an opportunity to distinguish himself in it. Although he was fresh from West Point—he had been on the plains but little more than a year—he had shown himself to be possessed of a good many qualities that go to make up a first-class soldier.

"I have been thinking of you ever since we were introduced," continued the lieutenant, "and wondering if you really knew the worth of the attentions that have been shown you. You came out here a perfect stranger, and yet you were received at once on terms of intimacy by the colonel, who can't do too much for you; while we little fellows, who have risked our lives in obedience to his orders, must keep our distance. The gulf between line and field officers in the regular army is a wide one, and no

subordinate must attempt to cross it. Before my commander will be as free with me as he is with you, I must wear an eagle on my shoulders."

"And yet he thinks a great deal of you," said Oscar. "He told me that you would some day make a fine officer."

"Did he say that?" exclaimed the lieutenant, his eyes sparkling with pleasure. "Well, I knew that he was satisfied with me. If he wasn't, he never would have invited me to go on this hunt."

"What did you do to please him?"

"I rode my horse to death while carrying despatches for him. While we were out on our last scout, it became necessary for him to communicate with the commandant at Fort Wallace; so he started me off with Big Thompson for a guide. I rode a splendid animal, which my father had presented to me when I was first ordered out here, and which I believe to be equal, if not superior, to anything that ever stood on four feet; but, before we had gone half the distance, he was completely done up, and Thompson had to shoot him. That

was in accordance with orders, you know. If a horse gives out, he is killed, to keep him from falling into the hands of the hostiles who may use him against us. My guide then ran ahead on foot, and I rode his horse. And would you believe it?—that miserable little pony of his was none the worse for the journey, and neither was Thompson, while I was so completely played out that I wasn't worth a cent for a whole week. By the way, I thought I saw you leave the post on horseback?"

"So I did; but out there in the sage-brush he threw me, and made off before I could catch him. I hope to find him somewhere about the corral."

"I hope you will, but I am afraid you won't. I think you will find that he has struck a straight course for the camp where his old master hangs out. Let's go and see if we can find him, and then we'll come back and take a look at that mule and wagon the quartermaster sent up from the village. The man who owns them has been waiting for you over an hour."

"Have you heard anybody else inquiring

for me?" asked Oscar, thinking of his brother. "Well, I have done all I can," he added to himself, upon receiving a reply in the negative. "Tom has made his own bed, and he must occupy it."

What the lieutenant said about the pony made Oscar a little uneasy. If it was true that the animal had gone off to hunt up his former owner, he might make up his mind that he had seen the last of him; for the Indian would take particular pains to see that he did not fall into the hands of the soldiers again very soon.

If he did not send him off to some secure hiding-place among the ravines, he would turn him loose with a lot of other ponies, and the most experienced horseman at the post could not have picked him out from among them.

If by any chance he was discovered and taken possession of by the soldiers, some "good" Indian would lay claim to him, and the agent—who is always more in sympathy with his Indians than he is with the troops whose presence protects him—would order him to be given up.

The lieutenant explained all this to Oscar as the two walked toward the corral. When they arrived there they could see nothing of the missing steed.

The guards were questioned, but the invariable reply was that no pony wearing a saddle and bridle had passed through the lines that afternoon.

He was not to be found in his stall either: and, after spending half an hour in fruitless search, Oscar gave him up for lost, and followed the lieutenant across the parade-ground to the colonel's quarters, in front of which stood the wagon and mule the quartermaster had sent up for the boy's inspection.

"Be you the college-sharp that's needin' a mu-el?" asked a roughly dressed man, who arose from the warehouse steps and sauntered up to them while they were critically examining the wagon and the long-eared animal that was hitched to it.

Oscar looked at the man, and then he turned and looked at the lieutenant, who said in a low tone:

"Every expert is called a 'sharp' out here.

If he is a good poker-player he is called a card-sharp; if he is an eloquent preacher he is called a gospel-sharp—and no disrespect is intended either. It is simply a plainsman way of talking. He has heard somewhere that you are backed up by a university, and that's the reason he calls you a college-sharp. It's a pretty fair looking rig, isn't it? I don't know that you can do better, for you may rest assured that the quartermaster wouldn't pick out anything inferior for you. You can easily find sale for it when you come back; and, if your horse is lost, and you don't feel like buying another, you can ride the mule when you want to go hunting. Now, then, what are you laughing at?"

"I am laughing at the idea of making a hunting horse out of a mule," replied Oscar.

"Now, I'll tell you what's a fact—they make good ones," exclaimed the lieutenant. "One of our favorite scouts rides a mule on all his hunting excursions, and that same mule can make an elk break his trot quicker than any thoroughbred in the regiment."

The officer might almost as well have talked Greek, for Oscar did not know what he meant when he spoke of an elk being made to break his trot; but, before he could ask an explanation, the lieutenant continued:

"You look him over, and I'll go and find the major. It isn't always safe to invest in horse- or mule-flesh in this country until you know how many owners it has. You don't want to pay for it more than once."

The young officer hurried off as he said this, and Oscar was left to complete his examination alone.

It was easy enough to see that the mule was a superior animal. Although he was not very large or heavy, he was well put together, and looked strong enough to draw a much weightier vehicle than the one to which he was hitched—a light "three-spring," built something like an ambulance, and provided with a canvas top to protect its cargo from the weather.

Oscar had already made up his mind to purchase, and a few words from the major—who presently came up—confirmed him in his decision.

The money—a good round sum—was paid over to the owner, who departed satisfied; the mule and wagon were given into the charge of one of the teamsters, and Oscar and the lieutenant hurried to their rooms to get ready for supper.

During the meal the loss of Oscar's pony was discussed, and the conclusion at which all the officers arrived was that the young taxidermist was just fifty dollars out of pocket, besides the amount he had paid for the lasso, saddle, and bridle, which the animal had carried away with him.

"No doubt those articles will be very acceptable to the Indian, who will be delighted to get his horse back again," said the major. "But I can mount you for this hunt. I'll give you Gipsy. She is a beautiful rider, and as gentle as a kitten. She is pretty fast, too, but when you are in the chase you'll have to look out for her. She is not as sure-footed as your last pony, and if you should happen to get into a prairie-dog's nest she might break her legs, and your neck into the bargain. While you are gone I'll make every effort to

recover your horse, but you mustn't be disappointed if I fail."

Supper over, Oscar went into his room to get ready for the start. When he came out again he carried his heavy Sharpe's rifle on his shoulder, a pair of saddle-bags, containing a few necessary articles, over his arm, and a belt filled with cartridges was buckled about his waist.

The other members of the party were waiting for him on the parade-ground. There were six of them in all, not counting the soldier who was to drive the wagon in which the tents and other camp equipage was stowed away, and the Osage guide, who sat on his pony near the gate, waiting for the party to start.

The hunters were all in their saddles, and the colonel's hounds were frisking about in front of the wagon, with every demonstration of joy.

The quartermaster stood holding by the bridle a beautiful little nag, which was affectionately rubbing her head against his shoulder.

This was the major's holiday horse—the one

he rode on dress-parades, and other extra occasions. The one he rode on his scouts and campaigns was a tall, raw-boned roan, which he called his war-horse.

Oscar threw his rifle over his shoulder—it was provided with a sling similar to the one that was attached to the fowling-piece—placed his saddle-bags in the wagon, and mounted his horse, whereupon the guide put his pony in motion and rode out of the gate, the cavalcade following close at his heels.

The sun was just setting as they started out; and, before they had proceeded many miles on their way, night settled down over the prairie.

As the sky was cloudy, and no stars were to be seen, the darkness soon became intense. All Oscar could see in advance of him was the white blanket worn by the Indian guide, who kept steadily on his way, as sure of his course as he would have been in broad daylight.

But the darkness did not affect the spirits of the hunters, who acted like a lot of boys just turned loose from school. Even the colonel had thrown aside his dignity, and seemed delighted to have the opportunity to let out

a little of the jovial spirit and good feeling which had so long been restrained by the requirements of official etiquette.

He shouted and sang songs until he was hoarse, and even yelled back at the wolves, which now and then serenaded the party.

Shortly after midnight they arrived at the place which had been selected for their camping-ground—a little grove of timber situated on one of the branches of the Platte.

Here the wagon was brought to a halt, and almost before Oscar had had time to gain any idea of his surroundings, the horses had been staked out, the tents pitched, and a fire started in the edge of the timber.

Oscar had often made camp in the woods after dark, but he found that the officers were better at such business than he was.

CHAPTER XVI.

A CHASE AND A CAPTIVE.

HAVING picketed his horse and placed his saddle and bridle under the wagon with the others, Oscar joined the group about the fire, who were preparing to dispose of a second supper before going to bed—their long ride in the keen air having given them a most ravenous appetite.

Oscar was as hungry as the rest, and never did he partake of homely fare with more relish than he did that night. The black coffee sweetened with brown sugar, and served up without milk, was equal to any his mother had ever made; the fat bacon was better than most beef, and the hard-tack was to be preferred to pastry.

He ate his full share of the viands, and then rolled himself up in his blankets, and, with his saddle for a pillow, slept the sleep of the weary, until he was aroused by the voices of

the teamsters, who, with the help of the Indian, had kept watch of the horses during the night.

A dash of cold water in his face, and a hasty breakfast, prepared him for the hunt, the details of which were arranged while the horses were being brought up.

"Now, Oscar," said the colonel, as he sprang into the saddle and led the way toward a plateau that lay about two miles distant from the camp, "stay as close to me as you can, and if we don't secure a specimen of something before another meal is served up to us, it will not be our fault. What do you intend to do with that rifle, I'd like to know?"

"Why, I am going to shoot a prong-horn with it if I get the chance," answered Oscar.

"Take it back to camp, and tell the teamsters to take care of it until you return," said the colonel. "It will only be in your way. Your revolver and lasso are what you must depend on this morning."

Oscar hastened to obey, and, when he reached the camp, he found that the colonel

had not brought his hounds along. As soon as he came up with the officer again he asked why he had not done so.

"We want to see some sport while our horses are fresh," was the reply, "and the best way to get it is to run the game down ourselves. A dash of three or four miles will take all the breath out of them, and then we'll give the hounds a chance. This afternoon we will try still-hunting, which has gone almost out of style, except among the Indians and a few white pot-hunters, and then you can use your rifle."

During the ride to the plateau the colonel improved the opportunity to give Oscar some instructions in regard to the manner in which antelope were hunted, and the course he must pursue to make the hunt successful.

He showed him how to throw the lasso, and, although the boy tried hard to imitate him, he did it simply out of politeness, and not because he believed that he would ever be able to capture anything with that novel weapon.

He could throw the lasso with all ease as far as its length would permit, and sometimes the

noose would go, and sometimes it wouldn't. He was not very expert with the revolver either, and often wished he had held fast to his rifle.

When the hunting party mounted the hills that led to the plateau, Oscar obtained his first view of a prong-horn.

He was disappointed, as almost everybody is who sees for the first time something he has often read or heard about. He knew that the antelope seldom exceeds three feet in height at the shoulders, and that it rarely weighs more than sixty or seventy pounds; but still he did not expect to find it so diminutive a creature.

There were several small herds grazing quietly within range of his vision, and but for their color they might have been taken for so many sheep.

Having carefully marked the position of the different herds, the hunters drew silently back down the ridge, and following in the lead of the colonel made a detour of a mile or more, in order to reach some hillocks on the leeward side of the game, under cover of

which they could approach some hundreds of yards nearer to the spot on which they were grazing.

On reaching this place of concealment, they dismounted for a few minutes to tighten their saddle-girths, arrange their lassoes and look to their revolvers; and, when everything was ready for the exciting chase that was to follow, they rode out on the plateau and showed themselves to the antelope.

The actions of the animals, who were thus disturbed at their quiet repast by the sudden appearance of enemies whose presence they had never suspected, astonished Oscar.

Instead of setting off in full flight at once, as he had expected they would, they one and all made a few "buck-jumps"—that is, sprang straight up and down in the air; and then, running together in a group, stood and stared at the intruders.

But when the colonel, with a wild Indian yell and a wave of his hat, dashed toward them at the top of his speed, they scattered like leaves before a storm, and made off at their best pace.

Oscar followed close at the colonel's heels, the gallant little black on which he was mounted easily keeping pace with the officer's more bulky horse; and presently he saw a full-grown doe, with a couple of fawns at her side, break away from the others and direct her course across the plateau toward the lower prairie that lay beyond.

"There's your chance, Preston!" shouted the colonel. "Shoot the doe and lasso the youngsters. You'll never find finer specimens if you hunt until your hair is as white as mine. Go it, now, and don't forget that the louder you yell the more fun you'll have!"

The hubbub that arose behind him made Oscar believe that the other members of the party must be of the same opinion.

The chorus of whoops and howls that rent the air when the game was seen in full flight was almost enough to raise a doubt in his mind as to whether his hunting companions were friendly white men or hostile Indians.

The colonel kept on after a magnificent buck on which he had set his eye. Oscar turned off

Oscar shoots the Prong-horn.

in pursuit of the trio which had been pointed out to him as his quarry, and Lieutenant Warwick came dashing after him, uttering hideous yells to urge both horses to renewed exertions.

The prong-horns ran with such surprising swiftness that Oscar, almost from the start, began to despair of overtaking them ; but by the time he had gone half a mile, he saw that he was rapidly closing up the gap that lay between himself and the game.

If the antelope's staying powers were equal to its speed for a short distance, all efforts to run it down on horseback would be unavailing ; but it soon begins to show signs of weariness, and then even a moderately fast horse can come up with it.

As soon as he had approached within easy range, Oscar drew his revolver from his belt, and, by a lucky snap shot, threw the doe in her tracks—an achievement which the lieutenant hailed with another chorus of yells.

Well satisfied with his work so far, Oscar returned his revolver to its place, and taking his lasso from the horn of his saddle, kept on

after the fawns, which were running wildly about, as if bewildered and terror-stricken by the loss of their guardian.

He hardly expected to capture one of them, for the little fellows, having shown themselves to be very light of foot, now proved that they were equally quick at dodging and doubling; but after he had made a few throws, which were nimbly eluded by the game, he succeeded, to his great surprise and the infinite delight of the lieutenant, who still followed close at his heels, shouting out words of encouragement and advice, in slipping the noose over the head of the nearest fawn and pulling it to the ground.

In an instant the two horses were at a standstill, and the lieutenant was on the ground beside the struggling captive. With his own lariat he securely tied its feet, and then he threw off the noose that was around its neck.

"Go on and capture the other one," he shouted, "and you will have a couple of the nicest pets you ever saw! You know how it is done now."

Setting his horse in motion again, the suc-

cessful hunter galloped away in pursuit of the captive's mate, and soon discovered it standing on a little hill a short distance away, looking wistfully around, as if trying to find its lost companion.

It allowed Oscar to come pretty close to it before it took the alarm; but when it was fairly started it made up for lost time. It ran faster than it did before; and it was only after a two-mile chase that Oscar was near enough to it to use his lasso.

He threw until his arm ached, and was on the point of settling the matter with a shot from his revolver, when the fawn, in the most accommodating manner, ran its head directly into the noose and was quickly pulled to the ground.

"There!" exclaimed Oscar, panting loudly after his exertions, "I did it, didn't I? Now, Gipsy, I am going to see if you are as smart as your master thinks you are. I want you to hold that fellow for me until I see what he looks like."

Oscar had often heard and read of the wonderful intelligence exhibited by trained horses

in assisting their riders to secure animals that had been lassoed in the chase, but he had never put the least faith in it. Now he had an opportunity to test the matter for himself, and the result proved that their skill had not in the least been exaggerated.

Having wrapped his lariat around the horn of his saddle, Oscar dismounted to take a nearer look at his captive.

As he approached, the little creature sprang to its feet, but was almost instantly pulled down again by a quick movement on the part of the horse, which stepped backward, throwing her weight upon the lasso as she did so.

"I declare, you do understand your business, after all, Gipsy!" exclaimed the boy, who watched her movements with great admiration. "Now, how am I going to tie this fellow? I believe I'll slip that noose under his forelegs, and make him walk to camp. If he doesn't feel like going peaceably, I can make the mare drag him. Hollo! What's that?"

Oscar, who had bent over his captive in readiness to carry out the plan he had hit upon,

suddenly straightened up, and burying his hands deep in his pockets, looked first toward a distant swell, down which the lieutenant was coming at headlong speed, waving his hat in the air and uttering triumphant yells, and then he looked at the fawn.

He was a born hunter, and whenever he bagged any game of which he had long been in search, and which promised, when mounted, to make an unusually fine specimen, he was a proud and happy boy; but just now he felt anything but pride in his success.

His little captive shed tears so copiously, and looked up at him with so appealing an expression, that Oscar, for the moment, was completely unnerved.

Then, too, its forelegs were lacerated, the skin having been cut away by repeated blows from the sharp points of the hinder hoofs, and Oscar knew that it must be suffering intensely.

Besides this, Gipsy, who was doing her duty faithfully, was leaning back so heavily on the lariat that the iron ring which formed the noose was pressed down upon the little

creature's throat until it seemed on the point of strangling.

"Good gracious!" cried Oscar, who took this all in at a glance, "I can't stand it, and I won't, either. There you are! Clear out, and take better care of yourself in future."

To run to his horse and undo the lariat that was made fast around the horn of his saddle was scarcely the work of a moment.

Holding it in his hand, just tightly enough to prevent the captive from jumping to its feet, he approached it, and with a quick movement opened the noose and threw it off its neck.

The fawn was on its feet in an instant, and in a few seconds more it was making railroad time down the ridge.

CHAPTER XVII.

COURSING AND STILL-HUNTING.

OSCAR watched the fawn as long as it remained in sight; and was glad to see that the injuries it had inflicted upon itself did not in the least interfere with its running.

When it disappeared from his view, he mounted his horse and turned about, to find the lieutenant sitting motionless in his saddle and looking at him with every expression of astonishment.

"What did you do that for?" he asked, as Oscar came up. "That wasn't a very bright trick."

"I couldn't help it," was the reply. "He cried so, and seemed to be in such misery."

"Well, you beat anybody I ever heard of!" exclaimed the young officer, who could scarcely believe his ears. "You come out here on purpose to hunt game, and when you secure as fine a specimen as one can find in a year's

shooting, you must up and let it go because it *cries!*"

The lieutenant shouted out the last word at the top of his voice, and clapped his hands, and waved himself back and forth in the saddle, and laughed until Oscar was obliged to laugh too.

"That's the way they all do," continued the officer, as soon as he could speak. "You'll have to get used to it."

"I can't, and I'll not try," was the emphatic rejoinder. "I'll never chase another antelope on horseback, unless I am in danger of going hungry. Why, his forelegs were all cut to pieces!"

"That's another thing they always do when they begin to get tired and are hard pressed. It is because they don't pick up their forefeet fast enough to keep them out of the way of the hind ones. Well, we have seen all we shall see of this drive, and we'd better go back and find the others. The colonel will want to try the speed of his dogs now. You'll not mind looking at a pretty race, I suppose?"

"I shall take no part in it," answered Oscar. "If the colonel wants more antelope, why doesn't he shoot them and be done with it?"

The lieutenant shrugged his shoulders as if to say that what the colonel did was something he could not answer for, and after that the two rode in silence, the officer now and then turning in his saddle to gaze in the direction in which the fawn had disappeared, and acting altogether as if he had half a mind to turn about and resume the pursuit on his own responsibility.

He believed in making as large a bag as he could when he went hunting, and the loss of the fawn troubled him not a little.

Oscar had almost decided to let the other captive go free also; but, when he reached the place where it had been left, he found that it was but slightly injured, not having been so long and perseveringly pushed as its mate; so he decided to keep it if he could, and take it back to the States with him.

Sam Hynes would go into ecstasies over a gift like that, and, as for his handsome sister,

she—that is—well, he would take it home with him, anyhow.

Having made his lasso fast around the fawn's fore shoulders, Oscar, with the lieutenant's assistance, untied its legs and allowed it to spring to its feet.

It "bucked" beautifully for a while, and made the most desperate efforts to escape; but at last it became exhausted by its useless struggling and permitted its captor to lead it back to the place where the doe had been brought down by the shot from Oscar's revolver.

She proved to be a very fine specimen, and the lieutenant, who had been in at the death of more than one antelope during the time he had been on the plains, assured the lucky hunter that he would see but few larger.

While they were examining their prize the colonel and the rest of the party appeared on the plateau; and, after looking at the boys through their field-glasses, one of them separated himself from his companions and began riding his horse in a circle at a full gallop.

"What is he doing that for?" asked Oscar,

when he saw the lieutenant laugh and swing his hat about his head.

"I suppose he wants us to go there," was the reply; "but he is giving the wrong signal. He is riding 'Danger! get together at once.' The first time I saw that signal, I tell you it made my hair stand right up on end. I was out on a scout with a small party, when one of our lookouts, who was so far away from us that we could hardly see him with the naked eye, began riding in a circle; and, by the time we were ready for action, we had ten times our number of Indians down with us. We can communicate with one another with our horses and our hands as easily as we could with signal-flags. If two or more columns of troops are marching through the same country out of sight of each other they raise smokes."

The lieutenant went on to explain the different signals that were in vogue among the soldiers; and, by the time he had succeeded in making Oscar understand them, they reached the plateau where the colonel's party was engaged in picking up the antelope that had fallen to their revolvers, and putting them

into the wagon, which the teamster had brought up in obedience to a signal from his commander.

The officers were loud in their praises of Oscar's skill, he having been the only one who was fortunate enough to capture any of the fawns alive, and they were both surprised and amused when they learned that one of his captives had been set at liberty "because it cried."

Leaving the teamster and the Indian to pick up the rest of the game and to care for the captive fawn, the party, accompanied by the hounds, which were now to be allowed to share in the sport, rode away from the plateau from which all the herds had been driven by the noise of the chase, and set out to hunt up a suitable coursing-ground.

After a five-mile gallop they found themselves on a level plain, bounded on all sides by high ridges, on the top of which they saw several small herds of prong-horns feeding in fancied security. They had taken measures to provide for their safety, having posted sentinels on the highest points of the ridges.

From their commanding elevations these lookouts could survey the plain for a long distance on two sides, their view in other directions being obstructed at intervals by thickly wooded ravines, under cover of which a cautious hunter could approach within easy rifle-range.

The colonel, who always acted as chief huntsman, now made a change in his programme.

Three of the party were at once sent off with orders to make a wide detour and find concealment in one of the ravines before spoken of.

When they had approached as close to the game as they could, they were to show themselves suddenly, and drive the herds into the plain, so that the hounds would be given a fair chance to show their speed.

As soon as the selected three had ridden away, the rest of the party, of whom Oscar was one, moved behind a swell out of sight; and, after turning their horses loose, stretched themselves out in the grass to wait until the time for action arrived.

The hounds were with his party, and, well

trained as they were, it was a task of no little difficulty to restrain them. They had obtained a fair view of their prospective game, and were eager to be sent in pursuit of it. The colonel frequently consulted his watch ; and, at the end of an hour, gave the order to "catch up," which is a plainsman's way of saying "get ready for the start."

He had calculated, almost to a minute, the time which the detachment he had sent off would consume in reaching the cover of the nearest ravine.

As he and Oscar rode to the top of the swell behind which they had been concealed, three mounted figures suddenly appeared in sight and charged upon the game.

The little animals scattered in all directions, some securing their safety by turning squarely off and running the wrong way, while the others, seeing no enemy on the plain below them, darted down the ridges and held a straight course for the colonel's party.

The impatience of the hounds increased as the distance between them and the approaching antelope was lessened ; but their master

had them under perfect control, and not one of them moved until the word was given.

When the nearest of the herd had arrived within three hundred yards of the ridge on which their new enemies were crouching in the tall grass, the colonel raised a yell, and the chase began.

It was fully as exciting as Oscar thought it would be, but he did not take as much interest in it as his friends did, for he could not help feeling sorry for the terrified creatures, who had nothing but their speed to depend upon.

Like the rest, he urged his horse forward at her best pace, in order to obtain as good a view of the run as he could; but his sympathies were all with the game, and he could not repress a shout of exultation when he saw one of the antelope suddenly turn at bay and tumble the nearest hound over with a vicious prod from his sharp little horns.

But, before it could repeat the blow, the other hound—the sagacious animals hunted in couples—pulled it down and ended its struggles in a moment.

Three antelope were captured during the

run; and, as both horses and dogs were pretty well tired out by this time, the hunters dressed their game on the spot, and then set out for camp. Supper was waiting for them, and they were hungry enough to do ample justice to it.

There was still one way of hunting prong-horns that our hero had not tried, and when the colonel had smoked his after-supper cigar he proposed to show Oscar how it was done.

Leaving the rest in camp with the hounds, they rode back to the plateau on which they had first sighted game in the morning, each carrying his rifle slung over his shoulder, and in his hand a long pole, with a red handkerchief attached to it.

The animals they had pursued in the morning, having got over their fright, had returned to their feeding grounds, and the colonel's first move was to attract the attention of some of them, which he did by riding slowly back and forth on the edge of the plateau.

Then he and Oscar dismounted, and, after hobbling their horses, planted their poles in the ground a few rods apart, and lay down in the grass to await developments.

The prong-horns watched all their motions with the keenest interest, and, as if by a common impulse, began circling around the fluttering handkerchiefs as if trying to learn what they were put there for.

Three of their number, one of them being the finest buck in the herd, very soon found out; for, the instant they came within range, the ready rifles cracked, and both the bullets went straight to the mark.

The colonel got in another effective shot before the herd was out of reach of his breech-loader, and these three, added to the number they had shot in the morning and secured with the aid of the hounds, made eleven fine animals they had to show as the result of their day's work.

Oscar, all inexperienced as he was, had done better than any of his companions. If he had not released that captured fawn, he would have had more to his credit than any other member of the party.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"CLIMB DOWN, PARD!"

IT was a merry party that assembled around the camp-fire that night as well as a tired one. Oscar sought his blanket at an early hour, and fell asleep listening to the hunting stories that were told, of which each officer, and especially the colonel, seemed to have an inexhaustible stock; but he was up in the morning with the rest, and fully as eager as they were to engage in the day's sport, which was to consist in shooting wolves with the bow and arrow, and coursing them with the hounds after the horses became weary.

He had no sympathy for the wolves, and tried as hard as he could to send his arrow into one; but the missiles all went wide of the mark, and, after he had emptied his quiver without bringing one of the animals to bag, he had recourse to his revolver, with which he succeeded in knocking over a specimen.

Oscar had always been of the opinion that nobody but an Indian could use the bow and arrow, and that even he was glad to lay it aside as soon as he had secured possession of a rifle; but in this he was mistaken.

An Indian certainly does long for a rifle above everything else in the way of a weapon, but he never gives up his bow and arrow, not even at this day, when Winchester rifles that shoot sixteen times without reloading can be had with comparatively little exertion.

The bow is more effective at close quarters than a muzzle-loading rifle, because it can be used with much greater rapidity; and ammunition is costly, and must be purchased of the trader, while the bow and arrow are implements the Indian can make for himself.

And as for skill in shooting—that was something that even a white man could acquire by practice.

Oscar was astonished to see what an adept the lieutenant had become during his short experience on the plains. He rarely missed pinning a wolf to the ground while his horse was going at full speed; and, with

the colonel's strong elk-horn bow, he could draw an arrow to the head with the greatest ease, while Oscar found it a task of no little difficulty to string it.

Some of the incidents of the day were amusing as well as exciting; and, although Oscar thoroughly enjoyed himself, and won praise for his perseverance and horsemanship, if not for his skill, he was glad when the late dinner was over, and the order was given to catch up.

He had nothing of which to complain, having secured with his own weapons as many specimens as he could use; but he thought he had lingered long enough in the vicinity of the fort, and was impatient to be off for the hills.

He had found out, through the colonel, that it was a wild and lonely region to which Big Thompson intended to guide him, and that more than one hunter had gone there who had never been heard of afterward; but everybody said that game of all kind was abundant, and that was just what he had been sent out there to find.

The night ride to the fort was accomplished

without any incident worthy of note, and at twelve o'clock the hunters were all in their beds, sleeping soundly.

Sunday was emphatically a day of rest with Oscar, and he needed it, for his hard riding had set every bone in his body to aching.

The others did not mind it in the least, for it was no uncommon thing for them to spend whole weeks in the saddle; but with Oscar it was an unusual experience, and it was a long time before he could pass a day on horseback without feeling the effects of it afterward.

On Monday morning he was up long before daylight, and in an hour's time he was ready for the start.

His luggage and the chest containing his tools were put into the wagon; the skins of the specimens he had already secured were packed in cotton and stowed away in one of the warehouses for safe keeping, and the captive fawn was given into the charge of the lieutenant, who promised to take the best possible care of it.

The pony the quartermaster had selected for him, and which had never been heard of

since he threw his rider in the sage-brush, was duly paid for; and the rest of his money was placed in the hands of the colonel, all except a small sum which he kept out to pay for any little articles of luxury—such as milk, butter, and eggs—he might wish to purchase at the ranches along the route.

No one had been inquiring for him at the fort during his absence; and this proved that Tom had either done something which made him afraid, or ashamed, to show himself, or else that he was entirely satisfied with his present companion, and had no desire to better his condition in life.

Such reflections as these, which constantly forced themselves upon Oscar's mind, did much to mar his pleasure.

By the time Oscar had eaten breakfast Big Thompson and his pony were on hand.

The guide looked dubiously at his employer's outfit, and then glanced down at the saddle-bags that contained his own, but he had no fault to find.

He waited patiently until the boy had taken leave of all the officers, who wished him every

success in his undertaking; and, when he saw Oscar climb to his seat in the wagon, he turned his pony about and led the way from the fort.

Our hero had decided to take the lieutenant's advice, and make his mule do duty as a hunting-horse. That would be taking a long step backward, Oscar thought; for, judging by the actions of his long-eared friend, there was about as much speed in him as there was in a cow. His gait in the wagon was a lumbering trot, which he was obliged to assume in order to keep pace with the fast-walking little beast on which the guide was mounted.

He scraped his hind feet on the ground as he went along, allowed his ears to bob back and forth in the laziest kind of a way, and if by chance the pony increased his lead by a few yards, the mule, instead of quickening his own pace in order to overtake him, would utter a mournful bray, as if begging him to slacken up a little.

Oscar was not at all pleased with him, but he could not afford to pay fifty dollars for another mustang; and, as the mule would not

be required to draw the wagon after the foot-hills were reached, it was nothing more than fair that he should earn his living and pay for himself, by carrying his master in pursuit of game.

He was not satisfied with his guide, either. The latter kept just far enough ahead of the wagon to make conversation impossible, and Oscar was left to the companionship of his own thoughts, which were not of the most agreeable nature.

The officers of the post, having taken a deep interest in him and his business, had tried hard to make his sojourn with them an occasion long to be remembered; and to give up his familiar intercourse with them for the society of this uncongenial man was by no means a pleasant thing to do.

The prospect before him was gloomy enough, Oscar thought; but, fortunately, things did not turn out as badly as he anticipated.

The guide misunderstood him, just as Oscar misunderstood the guide and the mule. They were both better than they seemed to be. It needed trouble to bring

out their good qualities; and that came soon enough.

Shortly after noon, by Oscar's watch, the guide halted on the banks of a small stream; and, after removing the saddle and bridle from his pony, turned the animal loose to graze.

He said nothing to Oscar; and the boy, who now began to feel provoked at his studied neglect, said nothing to him.

"I can hold my tongue as long as he can hold his," was Oscar's mental reflection. "If I must depend upon myself for companionship I can do it; but he'll attend to all the camp-work, I tell you, because that was what he was hired for."

Stopping the wagon near the place where the guide was starting a fire, Oscar unhitched the mule, turned him loose without removing any part of the harness except the bridle, and throwing himself down between the roots of a convenient tree, watched the motions of his guide, who now began preparations for dinner.

He filled the frying-pan with bacon for Oscar, the slices he intended for himself being impaled upon a stick, which was thrust into

the ground in such a way that the meat hung over the flames.

Then he placed the coffee-pot on the coals, and brought from the wagon tin cups and a tin plate, on which he had deposited a few hard crackers.

When the bacon was cooked to his satisfaction he placed the frying-pan on the ground in front of his employer, and set a cup filled with coffee beside it, after which he seized a handful of crackers and sat down on the other side of the fire to eat his bacon, using as a fork the stick on which it had been roasted.

"This is about the worst dinner I ever had set before me," thought Oscar. "If Thompson can't do better than this I'll cook for myself. There are plenty of other things in the wagon, and he might take a little pains to get up something a fellow can relish. I am not used to having my grub shoved at me as one would shove a bone to a hungry dog."

As soon as the guide had satisfied his own appetite he began gathering up the dishes, which he packed away in the wagon, after giving them a hasty dip in the stream.

He did not ask Oscar if he were ready to start; and, in fact, he did not seem to care. He hitched the mule to the wagon (that was an act of condescension that Oscar did not look for); and, having saddled his pony, rode off, leaving the boy to do as he pleased about following him.

He acted the same way when they went into camp that night; and, during the whole of the next day, he never spoke a word to Oscar.

He was sociable enough with the stockmen whose ranches they passed along the road, but not a syllable did he utter for his employer's benefit until he was ready to make another halt for the night. Then he reined up in front of a dug-out, and turned in his saddle to say:

"Pilgrim, if ye'd like to sleep under a white man's roof onct more afore ye git to the hills, here's yer chance. I reckon mebbe ye'd best do it, kase why, we leave the trail fur good bright an' arly to-morrer mornin'."

Then, without waiting to hear what the boy had to say to his proposition, he raised his voice and called out:

"Halloo, thar, Ike! Have ye went into yer

den, like a prairie-dog in winter, an' pulled the hole in arter ye? If ye aint, come outen that. I've brought ye a tenderfoot fur a lodger."

The dug-out looked like a mound of earth, about thirty feet long and half as wide; but that it was a dwelling was evident, from the fact that a piece of stovepipe projected from the roof, the thick cloud of smoke that rose from it indicating that a fire had just been started in the stove below.

A flight of rude steps, not made of boards, but dug out of the hard earth, led down to the entrance, in which hung an army blanket that did duty as a door. Taken altogether, it was a very forlorn-looking place. There was not another human habitation in sight.

As the guide ceased speaking, an answering whoop, uttered in a stentorian voice, came from the inside; and presently the blanket was raised and the owner of the voice appeared in the doorway.

He was a tall, brawny man, roughly dressed, but still rather neater in appearance than the

other dwellers in dug-outs whom Oscar had seen along the trail.

His hair and whiskers looked as though they were combed occasionally, and it was plain that he had sometimes washed his face, for when he came to the door he brought with him a towel, which he was using vigorously.

If he recognized an old acquaintance in the guide, there was nothing in his actions to indicate the fact. Indeed, he did not appear to see him. His gaze was fixed upon Oscar, at whom he stared with every indication of astonishment. He looked very hard at him for a moment; and, uttering an exclamation under his breath, stepped back into his house, dropping the blanket to its place.

Before the boy—who was somewhat supprised at these actions—could look toward his guide for an explanation, the man again appeared at the door, and this time he carried something besides a towel in his hands. It was a double-barrel shot-gun.

Oscar heard the hammers click as they were drawn back, and a moment later the weapon was looking him squarely in the face, while

the ranchman's eye was glancing along the clean brown tubes, and his finger was resting on one of the triggers.

"Climb down, pard," said he in savage tones. "I have been waiting for you."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE STOLEN MULE.

TO say that Oscar was astonished at the ranchman's words and actions would but feebly express his feelings.

He was utterly confounded; and, instead of obeying the order to "climb down," he looked toward his guide, whose blank expression of countenance showed that he understood the matter no better than his employer did.

"You heard me, pard," continued the ranchman, seeing that Oscar did not move. "You had better be a-tumbling, for I can't hold on to this barker much longer."

This implied that the ranchman was about to shoot; and Oscar, now beginning to realize the danger of his situation, sprang out of the wagon with such haste that he missed his footing as he stepped upon the wheel, and fell headlong to the ground.

He scrambled to his feet as quickly as he could, his movement being greatly accelerated by the report of the gun, which, however, was not pointed toward himself.

As quick as Oscar was, the guide was quicker. Without saying a word Big Thompson swung himself from his pony, and, dashing forward, seized the gun; and it was during the short but desperate struggle that ensued that the piece was discharged.

The ranchman fought furiously to retain possession of the weapon, but it was quickly torn from his grasp, and then the two men backed off and looked at each other.

"Now, Ike Barker!" exclaimed the guide, who was the first to speak, "what's the meanin' of sich actions as them, an' what did ye do it fur, I axes ye?"

"I'll talk to you after a while," was the ranchman's reply. "That's my mule, and I am going to have him!"

"Sho!" exclaimed the guide, whose face relaxed on the instant.

After a little reflection he stepped up and

handed back the gun he had taken from the ranchman.

This action satisfied Oscar that Big Thompson began to understand the matter, and considered that there was no longer any cause for apprehension. Indeed, Oscar began to understand the matter himself.

He was suspected of being a thief; but that did not trouble him, for he knew that he could easily prove his innocence. But, if the mule was a stolen animal, he would have to give him up to his lawful owner and purchase another. The very thought was discouraging.

His departure for the foot-hills would be delayed, and it would take two hundred dollars to buy another team. He had already drawn heavily on his reserve fund; and, if there were many more unexpected drafts made upon it, the expedition would have to be abandoned for want of means to make it successful.

"Now, young man," continued the ranchman, "where did you get that mule?"

"Wal, if that's what ye wanted to know, why couldn't ye have axed the question with-

out pintin' yer we'pon around so loose an' reckless?" exclaimed Big Thompson.

"I bought him at the fort," replied the boy. "The major found him at Julesburg, and it was by his advice that I made the purchase. I paid cash for him, and in the presence of two witnesses."

"What sort of a looking fellow was it who sold him to you?" asked the ranchman, who had walked up and taken the mule by the head, as if to show that he intended to hold fast to his property, now that he had found it again.

"I thought he was a respectable looking man," replied Oscar. "He wore a red shirt, coarse trousers and boots——"

"I don't care anything about his trousers and boots," exclaimed the ranchman impatiently. "How did he look in the face? That's what I want to know."

Oscar described the man as well as he could; and, when he had finished, Ike Barker, as he had been called, shook his head, and remarked that, although he was acquainted with almost everybody in that part of the country, he did

not know any man who answered Oscar's description.

"But there is one thing I do know," said he, turning to the guide—"that mule and that wagon belong to me. They were stolen early last summer by that miserable Lish, the Wolfer—you know him, Thompson—and when I—— What's the matter with you, young man?"

"Nothing," answered Oscar, with more earnestness than the occasion seemed to require.

"Then what did you say 'Ah!' for?" asked the ranchman.

Oscar hesitated. He did not know what reply to make to this question. The truth was the exclamation that attracted the notice of the ranchman had been called forth by a variety of conflicting emotions.

Lish, the Wolfer, was the chosen companion and friend of his brother Tom. He was suspected by the commandant of the fort of having been engaged in something during the previous summer that rendered him liable to arrest; and no doubt the stealing of the mule

and wagon was the "affair" to which the colonel referred.

If that was the case, Tom could have had no hand in the matter, for it was only recently that he had fallen in with the Wolfer.

Oscar knew now what Tom was suspected of; and he knew, too, that he was innocent. That was a great relief to him. But he knew, also, that his brother was the willing associate of a thief who was in danger of being apprehended or shot at any minute; and the knowledge of the fact weighed heavily on his mind.

What would his mother say if she knew it?

If he gave a truthful answer to the ranchman's question, he would be obliged to explain all this, and that was something he would not have done for the world.

However, he knew that he must make some reply, so he gathered his wits as quickly as he could, and said:

"I will answer your question by asking another. If you knew who it was that stole your mule, why were you in such haste to get the drop on *me?*"

Oscar had picked up this expression since he came on the plains.

"To get the drop" on one, means, in frontier parlance, to get the advantage of him.

"When I first came up here you said you had been looking for me," continued Oscar. "How did you know that your mule was in my possession?"

"I didn't know that he was in your possession. I only knew that he was coming, and that he would be here to-night."

"Who told you?"

"Nobody *told* me. I found it out in this way."

As the ranchman said this, he advanced and handed Oscar a piece of soiled paper, on which was written something that almost knocked him over.

He had never dreamed that he could have an enemy in that country, where he was so little known; but here was the plainest evidence to the contrary.

The note ran as follows:

MR. BARKER :

The mule I stole from you last summer will be along this way to-morrow afternoon. He will be driven by a young tenderfoot, who will claim to have purchased him from someone at the post ; but don't you believe him. He stole him, as I did. Be on the watch.

"Now," continued the ranchman, after Oscar had finished reading the note, and his words found an echo in the heart of the young taxidermist, who backed up against the wagon-wheel and gazed fixedly at the paper he held in his hand, "there's something that isn't exactly square about this business. The language made use of in that communication is as correct as any I could use myself, and I have had some schooling; in fact, I spent four years in William and Mary College. I am acquainted with Lish, the Wolfer—that is, I know as much about him as any white man does, for he used to herd for me—and if I had a sheep on my ranch as ignorant as he is I'd make mutton of him at once. Lish never wrote that note. He has somehow managed to pick up a partner who knows a thing or two, and he is the one who did the writing."

Oscar knew that very well. He recognized

the bold, free hand as soon as he put his eyes upon the note. It was his brother's.

"I wouldn't be willin' to give much fur that feller's ketch," remarked Big Thompson. "Lish is mighty keerless when it comes to the dividin'."

"I thought at first it was a trick of some kind," continued the ranchman, whose tone seemed to grow kindlier the longer he talked to the now discouraged young hunter; "but when I saw the mule I knew it wasn't. I am sorry I dropped on you so suddenly, for I really believe you bought the mule."

"Indeed I did, sir," answered Oscar, trying to choke down a big lump that seemed to be rising in his throat. "As I told you, I paid the money for him in the presence of witnesses."

"Have you done anything to make an enemy of Lish?"

"I never exchanged a word with him."

"Nor his partner, either?"

"I have never injured his partner in any way."

"Well, I can't understand the matter at

all," said the ranchman. "Lish had some object in sending me that note, but what it was I don't know. But I *do* know that the mule is mine, and that I must have him if I have to fight for him."

These words were uttered in a quiet but decided tone, and Oscar knew that the ranchman meant all he said.

CHAPTER XX.

INSIDE THE DUG-OUT.

POOR Oscar! This was a most unexpected and disastrous ending to the expedition upon which he had set out with such high hopes.

What would his mother do now? What would be the verdict of the committee, who seemed to have so exalted an opinion of his abilities, and whose confidence in him had led them to place in his hands a thousand dollars of the university's money?

It is true that he still had funds at his command, but he had use for them. If another mule must be purchased, where was he going to obtain the money to pay his guide? It was a bad case, altogether, and almost any boy would have been utterly discouraged. Oscar certainly was, and he was on the very point of abandoning the whole thing in despair, when something prompted him to say to himself:

"If I give up here, I must return that money; and how in the world am I to do that?"

This thought frightened him, and made him almost desperate. He hastily reviewed the situation, and in two minutes more had made up his mind how to act.

"All right, Mr. Barker," said he, giving back the note which the latter had handed him to read. "If this is your mule it is nothing more than fair that you should have him. Thompson," he added, turning to his guide, who had stood by, an interested listener to all that had passed between the ranchman and his employer, "what will you take for your pony?"

"Wal," said the latter, suddenly straightening up and winking hard, as if he had just been aroused from a sound sleep, "he aint fur sale, that there hoss aint."

"Mr. Barker," continued Oscar, "have you an extra pony that you would be willing to dispose of? I haven't money enough with me to pay for him; but I will give you an order on the colonel, which I assure you will be honored."

"No," was the disheartening reply. "I have but one, and I can't spare him. But you don't need a pony to carry you back to the fort, even if you are a tenderfoot. You can easily walk that distance."

"Who said anything about going back to the fort?" exclaimed Oscar, almost indignantly. "I have not the slightest intention of going back. I shall not allow this expedition to fall through for the want of a little pluck now, I tell you. I'll walk, since I can't buy a horse, but it will be toward the foot-hills. I'll take what I can on my back; and, Thompson, you will have to carry the rest. We'll not stop here to-night. We can easily make five miles more before it is time to go into camp, and every mile counts now."

"The foot-hills!" exclaimed the ranchman, who was plainly very much surprised. "What are you going there for at this time of year?"

"I am going to hunt. I was sent out by the Yarmouth University to procure specimens for its museum," answered Oscar.

"*You* were?" exclaimed the ranchman.

"Yes, *I* was."

Ike Barker looked toward the guide, who nodded his head in confirmation of Oscar's statement, whereupon the ranchman backed toward the little mound of earth that had been thrown up when the steps were dug out, and seated himself upon it.

"This beats my time all hollow," said he.

"It is the truth, whether it beats you or not," replied Oscar, who showed that he could be independent if he was in trouble. "I have my credentials in my pocket. I should have been successful in my undertaking if I hadn't been foolish, or, rather, unfortunate enough to buy this stolen mule. I shall have to leave my chest behind, after all. Mr. Barker, can I hire you to take it back to the fort for me?"

"Not by a long shot!" exclaimed the ranchman, suddenly jumping up and seizing Oscar by the arm. "Thompson, you turn your pony loose and unhitch that mule. You come into my den with me, Mr.—Mr.—What's your name?"

"Preston—Oscar Preston. But I don't want to go into your den."

"Well, you'll go, all the same. What sort

of a man do you suppose I am, anyhow—a heathen?"

Before Oscar could reply, the ranchman, having tightened his grasp on his arm, dragged rather than led him down the stairs, ushered him into the dug-out, and seated him on an inverted dry-goods box that stood in the corner near the stove.

"There!" said he. "Sit down and talk to me, while I go on getting supper. I didn't expect company to-night; and, as I have sent most of my grub and all my sheep off to the hills, I can't give you as good a meal as I could if you had come a week ago. I should have been on the way to the hills myself by this time, if it hadn't been for that note I found fastened to my door. How is everything in the States? Got any late papers with you?"

The friendly tone in which these words were spoken surprised Oscar. Could this be the same man who had pointed a loaded gun at his head a few minutes before?

While his host was speaking, Oscar had leisure to look about him. He had never

before seen the inside of a dug-out, and he was not a little astonished at the appearance of it.

It was really a comfortable dwelling, and not the dirty hole he had expected to find it. There was plenty of room in it; and the furniture it contained, although of the rudest description, showed that it had been fitted up as a permanent abode.

There were two bunks beside the door; and in one of them a comfortable bed was made up. The other was empty. The walls were covered by blankets and buffalo robes; two small dry-goods boxes did duty as chairs, and a larger one served as the table.

There was a small cupboard on each side of the stove, one of which contained a few tin dishes, while the other, Oscar noticed with some surprise, was filled with books.

A solitary candle burned in a bracket candlestick that was fastened against the wall; but, as there was a reflector behind it, the interior of the dug-out was well lighted.

The ranchman talked incessantly while he was busy with his preparations for supper;

but Oscar was too deeply engrossed with his own affairs to pay much attention to him.

The loss of the mule weighed heavily on his mind; but, after all, it did not trouble him so much as did the note which the ranchman said he had found fastened to his "door."

Oscar knew then, as well as he knew it afterward, that the note had been written by his brother, at the dictation of Lish, the Wolfer, and that it could have been written for no other purpose than to get him into trouble with the ranchman; but why the Wolfer and Tom should want to get him into trouble was something he could not divine. It was something that baffled him completely.

Worse than all, he was obliged to keep his own counsel; there was no one to whom he could go for advice.

He would have been glad to continue the journey that night; for he wanted to get away by himself and think the matter over.

Presently the guide came in, having unhitched the mule and turned his pony loose to graze, as the ranchman had directed.

He had but little to say while disposing of

his share of the homely supper that was speedily served up on the large dry-goods box, but left the ranchman and Oscar to do the talking.

The little he did say was addressed to his employer, who learned that he had attained to high rank during the last half-hour.

Although Oscar did not know it, he had made two firm friends by the course he had pursued.

An experienced plainsman has not the slightest respect for a "gentleman sportsman," which is the title that hunters from the States generally assume for themselves; and that was the reason why Big Thompson had been so morose and taciturn ever since leaving the fort.

It would have been bad enough, the guide thought, to spend the winter in the mountains in company with one of his own kind—a man upon whom he could depend in any emergency, and who could relate stories of adventure around the camp-fire as thrilling as any he could tell himself; but the thought of passing long months in the society of a tenderfoot, and

a stripling, besides, was most distasteful to him.

He had consented to act as Oscar's guide simply because he knew the colonel wished him to do so, and because he had been made aware of the fact that the boy had money to pay him for his services; but he would much rather have remained near the fort, and passed the time in idleness.

Now he seemed to have different opinions. A boy who could look into the muzzle of a double-barrel with as little trepidation as Oscar had exhibited, and who could hold to his purpose in spite of difficulties and disappointments that would have disheartened almost anybody, must have something in him, even if he was a tenderfoot.

Not being accustomed to such things, the guide did not know how to acknowledge his mistake directly, but he could indirectly; and he did it by dubbing Oscar "professor," by which dignified title he ever afterward addressed him.

That was Big Thompson's way of showing his friendship; but the ranchman, although

he very soon fell into the way of calling Oscar by the same title, showed his appreciation of the boy's pluck and independence in a much more substantial manner.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE RANCHMAN SAYS SOMETHING.

"NOW, professor," said the ranchman, as he rose from his box and filled his pipe for his after-supper smoke, "you look as though a wink of sleep would do you good. Whenever you get ready to turn in, bring your blankets from the wagon and take possession of that empty bunk. It belongs to my herdsman, who has gone to the hills with the stock."

Oscar was glad to comply at once with the invitation. He had found that riding in a wagon behind a lazy mule, which had to be urged all the time in order to keep him in motion, was almost as hard work as riding on horseback, and he was tired and sleepy.

Rude as the bed was, after he had got it made up, it looked inviting, and he lost no time in tumbling into it. But he did not fall asleep at once, as he had expected he would,

for his mind was too busy with the events of the day.

The ranchman and Big Thompson drew their boxes in front of the stove, smoked their pipes, and, without taking the trouble to ascertain whether or not the boy was asleep, discussed him and his affairs with the utmost freedom.

The guide was talkative enough now, and Oscar wondered if he would use his tongue as freely when they were alone in the hills.

"Who is this young fellow, anyhow?" was the ranchman's first question.

"Oh, he's one of them thar crazy loons who aint got nothin' better to do than tramp about the country, an' ketch all sorts of critters, an' stuff 'em full of hay or something," said Big Thompson.

And the tone in which the reply was made led Oscar to believe that the guide had anything but an exalted opinion of a boy who could pass his time in that way.

"Then he really is a taxidermist, is he?"

"Which?" exclaimed Big Thompson.

"I mean that he is what he pretends to be?"

"I reckon. They called him a college-sharp down to the post; an' the kurn, he took him in the minute he came thar, an' treated him like he was a little juke, or one of them thar nobby fellers from across the water. If it hadn't been fur the kurn, ye wouldn't 'a' ketched me here with him."

Oscar might have heard much more of this sort of talk if he had chosen to listen; but, as he was not in the habit of playing eavesdropper, he turned his face to the wall, drew the blankets over his head, and composed himself to sleep.

Early the next morning he was awakened by the banging of the stove-lids, and started up, to find his host busy with his preparations for breakfast.

He wished the boy a hearty good-morning, but he did not have anything of importance to say to him until the meal was over, and Oscar, arising from his seat, pulled out his pocket-book.

"How much do I owe you, Mr. Barker?" said he.

"Look here, professor," replied the ranch-

man, with a smile, "after you have been in this country a little longer, you will know better than to ask a question like that."

"Very well," said Oscar, who knew what that meant. "I am greatly obliged to you for your hospitality. Now, I can't take my outfit with me; and I ask you again if I can hire you to take it back to the fort for me?"

"And I tell you again that you can't," was the blunt, almost rude, reply.

"Well, will you take it for nothing—just to accommodate me?"

"No, I won't."

"Very well," said Oscar again. "Then I shall have to abandon the most of it right here. Thompson, come out to the wagon and select such things as you think we ought to take with us."

"Are you going to walk to the foot-hills?" asked the ranchman, with an amused twinkle in his eye that made Oscar angry. "The valley to which Thompson intended to take you is all of a hundred miles from here."

"I don't care if it is a thousand. I am going there, if I live," was the quick and

decided reply. "If my guide will stick to me —and I know he will, for the colonel said so— I'll make a success of this expedition, in spite of everything."

"You're mighty right—I'll stick to ye!" exclaimed Big Thompson; and, as he spoke, he advanced and extended a hand so large that Oscar's sturdy palm—which was promptly placed within it—was almost hidden from view. "I never seen sich grit in a tenderfoot afore. Perfessor, ye kin swar by Big Thompson every time, an' don't ye never forgit it!"

"Pilgrim," said the ranchman, "you said something last night about credentials. Perhaps you wouldn't take offence if I should ask you to produce them. We always like to know a little about strangers who pass through this country, claiming to be something grand."

"I don't claim to be anything grand. I simply say that I have been sent out here to collect specimens of natural history for the Yarmouth University; and, if you don't believe it, look at that!" exclaimed Oscar indignantly, at the same time handing out a letter signed by the president of the college and the

secretary of the committee, under whose instructions he was working. "Probably you will say next that *I* stole your old mule!"

"Well, I *have* yet something to say," answered the ranchman, as he opened the letter; "and, when I say it, it will be to the point. You hear me?"

These words were spoken in a very decided tone, and Oscar could not make up his mind whether the ranchman was angry or not. Sometimes he was sure he was, and then again he was equally sure he wasn't.

He was certainly acting very strangely, and so was Big Thompson, who, after his outburst of enthusiasm, relapsed into silence again, and now seemed to be utterly indifferent to all that was passing before him.

He stood in front of the stove, with his head inclining a little forward, so that it might not come in contact with the rafters; and Oscar could not tell by the expression on his face whether it would be safe to depend on him for help in case of trouble between himself and the ranchman, or not.

"Look here, professor," said the latter,

after he had read and returned Oscar's credentials, "that's my mule and wagon."

"Well, I don't dispute it, do I? Take them and welcome."

"But look here, professor," repeated the ranchman: "I'm a student myself—I haven't brains enough to be a scholar—and I couldn't think of throwing a straw in the way of those young fellows out there in Yarmouth, who want a museum to assist them in studying natural history; so, Thompson, you just go out and hitch up that mule; and, professor, you jump into the wagon and go on, and good-luck attend you."

Oscar was electrified. He could hardly believe that he was not dreaming. The only thing real about the whole proceeding was the tremendous grip the ranchman gave him as he said this. There was no dream about that.

"Do you mean to tell me that I can have the mule?" exclaimed Oscar, as soon as he could speak.

"Yes," replied the ranchman, still holding Oscar's hand in his own. "I see very plainly that you can't go on without him, and so I

will lend him to you. When you come back in the spring, you can give him up. If you don't find me here—and you may not, for life in these parts is so uncertain that a fellow can't tell to-day where he will be to-morrow—he is yours, to sell or to keep, just as you please."

Oscar now began to realize that the ranchman, in spite of a certain flippancy of manner, was in earnest; and the revulsion of feeling was so great that, for a moment, the dug-out seemed to swim around him.

"Mr. Barker," he stammered, trying to squeeze the huge palm, to the strength of which his own would have offered about as much resistance as a piece of pasteboard, "I don't know how to thank you for your kindness."

"Then I wouldn't try," the ranchman said lightly. "Besides, it is not kindness; it is only justice. You had no means of knowing that the mule was stolen, and it wouldn't be right for me to take him away from you. If I should claim him now, and thereby put the success of your expedition in

jeopardy, I could never look a white man in the face again."

Ike Barker spoke seriously now; and, for the first time since his arrival at the dug-out, Oscar began to see what manner of man it was with whom he was dealing. His backwoods bluntness of manner was entirely foreign to him. He had learned to assume it in order to conceal feelings and sentiments, the exhibition of which would have been regarded by those with whom he was daily thrown in contact as unmanly in the extreme.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE CAMP IN THE FOOT-HILLS.

"I SAY, perfessor, I reckon ye had an idee, mebbe, that I was kinder goin' back on ye, when we was down thar to Ike Barker's, didn't ye?"

The nearest approach to a smile that Big Thompson could command overspread his face, as he removed his pipe from his mouth long enough to address this question to his employer.

It was the first time he had in any way referred to the incidents that had happened at the ranchman's dug-out.

The guide was seated on his blanket in front of a cheerful fire; and Oscar stood in front of the open door, watching the storm that was raging.

The air was filled with snow-flakes, and the evergreens behind the cabin were bending low before a furious gale.

The short winter's day was drawing to a close, and as the young hunter gazed at the fading landscape before him, and listened to the howling of the wind, he thrust his hands deeper into his pockets, shivered almost involuntarily, and thanked his lucky stars that he was comfortably sheltered.

Big Thompson's question aroused him from his revery. He stepped back into the cabin, closed the door behind him, and dropped the heavy bar that secured it in its place.

"Yes, I did think so," said he, as he turned down his coat-collar and shook the snow-flakes from his cap. "All you did for me was to take that gun out of Ike Barker's hands. After you had done that, you stood and looked on with the utmost indifference."

"Wal, no," answered the guide slowly. "I heard every word he said to ye, an' if I hadn't knowed the man I might have jined in the talk ye had with him. But, ye see, I knowed him. I knowed the mu-el was his'n, kase he said so; but that didn't pester me none, fur I was sartin that when he found out who ye was an' all about ye, he wouldn't

make no furse about the critter. That's why I kept my mouth shet. I knowed ye wasn't in no danger."

Oscar and his guide were now fairly settled in their camp in the foot-hills; and if Leon Parker could have looked in upon them that stormy night he would have gone into ecstasies.

Their journey from Ike Barker's ranch had been accomplished without the occurrence of any incident worthy of note.

The weather was all they could have desired, and Oscar and Big Thompson got on very well together.

The guide no longer held himself aloof, as he did at the beginning of the journey. He admired the courage the boy had exhibited, and used his best endeavors to prove himself an agreeable and entertaining companion.

The first thing he did was to take Oscar's place in the wagon, and give the boy his pony to ride.

They made rapid progress after that, for the mule was not long in finding out that in Big

Thompson he had a driver who knew how to manage him.

The guide had an almost inexhaustible fund of stories at his command, and enlivened many a weary mile of the way by relating them to his employer, who was always glad to listen.

This camp was located in a pleasant valley in the very heart of the foot-hills; and they supposed that there was not a human being within a hundred miles of them.

The valley, so the guide informed Oscar, was twenty miles long and half as wide. A deep and rocky ravine gave entrance to it; and it was in a sheltered nook, about half-way between the mouth of this ravine and the opposite end of the valley, that the camp had been made.

This was the place for which Big Thompson had been aiming ever since leaving the fort. He assured Oscar that it was a fine hunting-ground; and they had not been in the valley twenty-four hours, before the boy saw enough with his own eyes to convince him that such was the fact.

The game, which always retreats to the foot-hills on the approach of cold weather, seemed to have flocked here for shelter; and a better winter abode could not have been found.

The high and thickly wooded hills, that arose on every side, effectually shut off the icy blasts that came roaring down from the mountains; the pasturage was rich and abundant; and the clear, dancing trout-brook that wound through the valley afforded a never failing supply of water.

Oscar had discovered an otter-slide on the banks of the stream; and that indicated that fur-bearing animals were to be found in the vicinity.

He had seen a big-horn watching him from the summit of a distant hill; the first blow he struck with his axe, when he went out to cut logs for the cabin, had frightened from his concealment in the bushes the first mule-deer he had ever seen; and a herd of lordly elk, led by a magnificent buck, which Oscar resolved he would one day secure, had fled precipitately at the sight of their first camp-fire.

But such harmless animals as these were not the only inhabitants of the valley. The fierce carnivora that preyed upon them had followed them from the mountains; and the first night that Oscar passed in the valley had been enlivened by a chorus from a pack of gray wolves, followed by a solo from a panther.

A trap, baited with a muskrat, which Oscar had set for a mink, was robbed by a wolverine; and one morning, while they were out hunting for their breakfast, Big Thompson showed him where a bear had crossed the brook. All these things seemed to indicate that their opportunities for sport and excitement would prove to be excellent.

The hunters' first care, on arriving at their camping-ground, was to provide a house for themselves, which they did by erecting a neat and roomy log cabin in the sheltered nook before spoken of.

It was different from those erected by the early settlers, in that it had no windows and no chimney; all the light, during the day-time, being admitted through the door, and through

an opening in the roof, at which the smoke passed out.

Under this opening a hole about two feet square had been dug in the dirt floor, and this served as the fireplace.

Oscar and his guide had been exceedingly busy during the last three days; but now their work was all done, and they were securely housed for the winter.

Although it was cold and bleak outside, the interior of the cabin was warm and cheerful. A fire burned merrily on the hearth; and, by the aid of the light it threw out, one could easily see that the hunters had not neglected to provide for their comfort in various ways.

The cabin was provided with a table, a cupboard for the dishes, and a stool for each of its occupants—all made of slabs split from pine-logs, hewn smooth with an axe; and the various articles comprising their outfit were disposed about the room in orderly array.

There were no buffalo-robes for beds, but there were fragrant pine-boughs instead,

blankets in abundance, and a joint of venison hanging from the rafters overhead.

One end of the cabin was occupied by the wagon, which had been taken to pieces and stored there for protection from the weather.

In the rear of this cabin was another, not quite so carefully built, into which the pony and mule were driven every night. During the day they were allowed to roam at will in the valley (the guide said that when the snow came and covered the grass they would be obliged to cut down cottonwood trees for them to browse upon); and, as soon as it began to grow dark, they were shut up for security.

All the "signs" indicated that beasts of prey were abundant in the valley; and, if a pack of wolves or a hungry grizzly should chance to make a meal of the mule, how would they get Oscar's specimens and chest of tools back to the fort in the spring?

Taken altogether, it was just such a camp as he had often read of; and Oscar, as he rubbed his hands over the fire and gazed about their comfortable quarters, grew enthusiastic.

"Now, this is what I call comfort," said he. "With plenty to eat, a good supply of firewood close at hand, a tight roof to shelter us from the storm, and no enemies to trouble us—what more could a couple of hunters ask for? I don't think spending a winter in the foot-hills is so bad after all."

The guide smiled and nodded his head significantly, but made no other reply. He knew that this was the poetry of a hunter's life, and that the prose would come soon enough.

Having arranged his blankets and thrown a few sticks of wood upon the fire, Oscar removed his boots and coat and lay down to rest, leaving Big Thompson to the companionship of his pipe and his own thoughts.

He lay for a long time watching the sparks as they ascended toward the opening in the roof, and listening to the roaring storm, which seemed to increase in violence every moment; and finally, while he was laying elaborate plans for the capture of some of the wolves, whose mournful howls now and then came faintly to his ears, he passed quietly into the land of dreams.

He did not know that there was another camp in the valley, and that other ears besides his own were listening to the howls of those same wolves, but such was the fact.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HUNTING THE BIG-HORN.

OSCAR slept soundly that night, in spite of the roaring of the wind and the howling of the wolves, and awoke at daylight to find breakfast waiting for him. A glance out at the door showed him that the storm had ceased. The weather was clear and cold, and the snow covered the ground to the depth of six inches.

"Just deep enough for tracking," Oscar remarked, as he gave his hands and face a thorough washing in it.

Of course the first thing on the programme was a hunt.

That was what the boy came out there for, and he was anxious to begin operations at once.

He longed to bring down one of the big-horns he had seen watching him at his work, and to knock over one of the lordly elk that had

scurried away with such haste when he and Big Thompson kindled their first camp-fire in the valley.

So very impatient was he that the breakfast the guide had so carefully prepared did not delay him more than five minutes.

He did not sit down to the table at all, but swallowed his coffee scalding hot, and walked up and down the cabin, buckling on his accoutrements with one hand, while he had his venison and cracker in the other.

The guide was more deliberate in his movements. He was almost too deliberate, Oscar thought.

After he had fully satisfied his appetite, he put away the dishes, slowly filled and lighted his pipe; and, not until he had set the cabin in order did he take his rifle down from the pegs on which it rested, and sling on his powder-horn and bullet-pouch.

Then a short consultation was held; and, after the guide had repeated some of the instructions he had given Oscar in regard to deer-hunting, and described to him the place at which he intended to camp at noon, they

left the cabin, Big Thompson turning his face toward the brook that flowed through the valley, while Oscar directed his course along the base of the cliffs.

"Now, perfessor, yer sartin ye aint afeard of nothing?" said the guide, as they were about to separate.

"Of course not," answered Oscar promptly. "You must have asked me that question a dozen times since we planned our hunt yesterday afternoon."

"Wal, I know it. I ax ye kase it aint every tenderfoot who would care to go philanderin' off by himself in a country like this."

"You suggested it yourself," said Oscar. "You said that if we hunted about half a mile apart, we would stand a better chance of scaring up game than we would if we went together."

"An' I say so now."

"Then we'll carry out our plan. I shall not be afraid until I see something to be afraid of. Good-by! If you reach the camping-ground before I do, don't forget to give me the signal."

"He's a cool one, if he is a tenderfoot," muttered Big Thompson, as he shifted his heavy rifle to the other shoulder, and continued on his way toward the brook. "If I could see him facin' some kind of a varmint, like a grizzly or panther, I could tell jist how much pluck he's got. I'll be kinder keerful how I go too fur away frum him, kase he may see sumthin' to be afeard of afore he knows it."

Meanwhile, Oscar was walking slowly along, just outside the bushes and evergreens that lined the base of the bluffs, looking for a ravine that would lead him from the valley into the hills.

"Thompson gave me emphatic instructions to keep within hearing of him," said the boy to himself; "but I shall do as I please about that. He may find a deer or two drinking at the brook; but my chances for jumping game along here are not worth a copper. I am hunter enough to know that; so I'll just go up this way and see if I can find one of those sheep."

As Oscar said this, he turned into a deep

gorge that opened into the valley, and began picking his way carefully over the snow-covered bowlders toward the hill which had served as a lookout station for the sentinel big-horn.

All that the young hunter knew of the habits of these animals he had gained from conversation with his guide.

He had learned that, like the antelope, they always put out sentinels when they were feeding; that those sentries invariably stationed themselves on the highest hills in the vicinity of the flock; that their eyes were keen, and their noses so sharp that they had been known to detect the presence of the hunter while he was yet more than half a mile away; that they were to be found on their feeding-grounds only in the morning or late in the afternoon; that when they had satisfied their appetites they retreated to the most inaccessible ledges, to which no enemy could follow them without their knowledge; and that, owing to their timidity and vigilance, it was almost impossible to bring one of them to bay, except under the most favorable circumstances.

Oscar thought of all these things as he toiled slowly up the gorge, stopping every few feet to examine the ground before him, and making use of every bush and bowlder to cover his advance; and the difficulties he saw in his way made him all the more determined to succeed.

"Big Thompson doesn't think much of my abilities as a hunter," said he to himself, "and I don't know how I could surprise him more than by shooting a big-horn, unless I were to shoot a panther or a grizzly, and that is something I don't expect to do. In fact, I have no desire to attempt it. The wind is in my favor, and that is something upon which I can congratulate myself."

For nearly an hour Oscar continued to work his way along the ravine; and, when he believed that he had arrived at a point opposite the pinnacle on which he had seen the sentinel big-horn, he turned into the bushes and began clambering slowly up the cliff.

As it was almost perpendicular, his progress was necessarily slow, but he reached the top at

last; and, cautiously raising his head, looked over it.

He had no sooner done so than he uttered an exclamation under his breath, and drew his head quickly back again.

He crouched behind the cliff long enough to cock his gun, and then he straightened up, at the same time drawing the weapon to his shoulder.

Before him was a level plateau, containing perhaps ten or fifteen acres. On the right, and in front, it was bounded by the gorge that Oscar had been following; and on the left was the valley in which the camp was located.

On the other side rose a perpendicular wall of rock that extended entirely across the plateau. Near the base of this rock were the objects that had attracted Oscar's attention—four gray wolves, which were feasting on a mountain sheep they had killed for their breakfast. Oscar knew at once that it was a sheep, for he could see the head and horns.

"What a pity that I didn't happen along here when they first killed him!" was the boy's mental reflection. "He must have been

a fine fellow, judging by the size of those horns. Well, as I didn't get the sheep, I'll knock over a couple of the wolves for our museum; and the horns I'll give to Sam Hynes to put up in his mother's dining-room."

So saying, Oscar rested his rifle over the top of the bluff; and, drawing a bead on the largest of the wolves, waited with all the patience he could command for one of his companions to get behind him, hoping to kill both of them with one bullet.

The wolves gnawed and snapped at one another over their meal; and, although they were constantly changing their positions, and the two that Oscar wished to secure frequently came within range, their motions were so rapid that he dared not fire at them for fear of missing his mark.

At the report of his gun they would doubtless take to their heels, and his chances for shooting one on the run were not one in a thousand.

While the boy was waiting for a shot, he was suddenly startled by hearing a loud snort close at hand; and, turning his head quickly,

he was astonished almost beyond measure to see an immense mountain-sheep standing on the edge of the plateau.

His gaze was fastened upon the wolves, whose presence did not seem to cause him the least alarm. It rather seemed to encourage him; for now and then he lifted one of his forefeet, and stamped it spitefully on the ground, after the manner of a domestic sheep.

It was the first of these animals of which Oscar had ever obtained so near a view; and he told himself that in color and shape it resembled a deer more than it resembled anything else.

It was covered with hair instead of wool, and its color was tawny, changing to white on the flanks and breast. But it carried the horns of a sheep, and they were really magnificent.

Where the animal came from so suddenly Oscar did not know, nor did he stop to ask himself the question. He was there, and the next thing was to secure him.

Remembering the mountain-sheep's wary

nature, Oscar exercised the utmost caution in turning the muzzle of his rifle from the wolves toward the buck.

Fortunately he succeeded in accomplishing this without alarming the timid animal, which was giving all his attention to the wolves; and, glancing along the clean, brown barrel, the boy was on the very point of pressing the trigger when another interruption occurred.

Three or four heads, adorned with horns like the gnarled branches of an oak, suddenly appeared above the edge of the plateau, and as many more came close behind them; these were followed by others; and, in less than a minute, a dozen full-grown bucks were standing in plain view of the young hunter, and not more than fifty yards away.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A FREE FIGHT.

THE sight was one that would have made the nerves of even an experienced hunter thrill with excitement; and we can imagine the effect it must have had upon Oscar, who had never seen anything like it before.

He knew now where the leading buck came from so suddenly. He and the rest of the flock had been down to the valley to slake their thirst at the brook, and were now returning to their feeding-grounds.

Probably the sheep the wolves had killed was a member of the same flock, which had been left behind by his companions. That he had not been attacked while in their company was speedily proved to Oscar's entire satisfaction.

The hunter did not shoot for two reasons. The newcomers, when they mounted the bluff,

stepped up between him and the leading buck, completely concealing him from view; and even if he could have seen him, it was by no means certain that Oscar would have brought him down, for there were others in the flock that were just as large as he was, and whose horns were just as finely developed. It was hard to choose among so many.

While Oscar was running his eye over the flock, trying to make a selection, the big-horns ranged themselves in a half-circle on the edge of the plateau, and snorted and stamped their feet while they watched the wolves at their repast.

The fierce animals evidently did not like the looks of things at all, for they stopped their quarrelling among themselves; and, keeping one eye on the sheep, growled savagely at them, while they made all haste to finish what was left of their breakfast.

Matters stood thus for just about a minute, and then one of the sheep bounded forward with an angry snort; and, lowering his head, struck the nearest of the wolves a blow in the ribs that fairly lifted him off his feet.

As quick as thought the gallant buck turned upon another; but, before he could strike him, the wolves closed upon him and pulled him to the ground.

They did not have time, however, to inflict any serious injury upon him; for he was too promptly backed by every one of his companions.

Rushing forward in a body, they closed upon the wolves from all sides; and Oscar was the amazed spectator of one of the strangest battles that any hunter ever witnessed.

He was deeply interested in it, and so greatly bewildered, besides, that he entirely forgot that he had a loaded gun in his hands.

For a few seconds the combatants were mixed up in the greatest confusion, and it was a wonder to Oscar that the bucks, in their terrific rushes, did not knock one another over; but they seemed to know just where to strike, and every charge they made was followed by a yelp of pain from some unlucky wolf.

The fight had hardly commenced before it became apparent to Oscar that the wolves were getting the worst of it, and would have been glad to escape if they could; but their enemies had hemmed them up against the rocks, and every time one of them attempted to break through the encircling ranks, he was met by a blow that knocked him back again.

Finally, one succeeded in working his way out. Nearer dead than alive, he suddenly made his appearance from beneath the feet of the charging big-horns, and started across the plateau with all the speed he could command; but his pace was not rapid, for the life had been well-nigh knocked out of him by the terrific blows he had received.

He was pursued by a splendid old buck, which came up with him just as he reached the edge of the plateau, and sent him heels over head into the gorge.

In his eagerness to inflict further punishment upon his discomfited enemy, the buck approached within less than twenty-five yards of the concealed hunter before he became aware of his presence.

Then he must have discovered him, or caught his wind, for he stopped suddenly, and, wheeling like a flash, went back across the plateau with short, high bounds, at the same time uttering notes of warning that brought the battle to a close at once.

His companions gathered about him in a frightened group ; and Oscar, knowing that in a moment more they would be off like the wind, drew his rifle quickly to his face and pulled the trigger.

The buck which had discovered his presence paid for his vigilance with his life. He fell dead in his tracks, and the others fled with every demonstration of terror.

In less time than it takes to write it, Oscar threw out the empty shell, pushed in a fresh cartridge which he had held in his hand, and, just as the big-horns were about to plunge headlong into the gorge, he made a hasty snap-shot, and had the satisfaction of seeing another of their number fall to his knees; and, after struggling a moment to regain his feet, roll over on his side.

Such luck as this was quite unexpected,

and it set Oscar almost wild with excitement.

Leaping upon the plateau, he ran forward to examine the first buck he had brought down, at the same time sending up the hunter's cry with all the power of his lungs.

"Who-whoop!" he shouted.

"Who-whoop!" came the answer almost immediately.

And, to Oscar's delight, it sounded close to the foot of the bluff.

This proved that Big Thompson had struck the trail of the big-horns in the valley, and that he was following it up.

"What ye doin' thar?" asked the guide.

"I have been getting the start of you," replied Oscar.

"An ye've gone an' skeered away them big-horns, an' haint got nuthin', nuther," said Thompson.

"What's the reason I haven't?" shouted Oscar in reply. "I've got two sheep—and, I declare, I've got a wolf also," he added, a moment later. "Two of them, and another big-horn, as I live!"

After the big-horns discovered his presence, Oscar had paid no attention whatever to the wolves.

He supposed that they had taken themselves safely off as soon as their enemies stopped pounding them; but just then he happened to cast his eye toward the battle-ground, and discovered, to his surprise, that the conflict had been more desperate than he had imagined.

One of the wolves lay motionless at the foot of the rocks, another was vainly endeavoring to crawl off on two legs, and one of the finest big-horns in the flock was struggling feebly near by.

A merciful bullet from Oscar's rifle quickly put the wounded sheep out of its misery, and a second shot tumbled over the disabled wolf.

"What in creation are ye wastin' so much powder fur, up thar?" cried the guide, who was working his way slowly up the side of the almost perpendicular bluff.

"I am not wasting it," was the boy's answer. "If you don't believe it, come up and see for yourself."

Big Thompson was coming with all possible

haste, but he could not scale the bluff as easily as the sheep did, and it was fully ten minutes before he reached the plateau.

Those ten minutes were occupied by Oscar in dragging his game together, and securing the head of the big-horn that had been killed by the wolves.

The guide reached the top at last, and his countenance indicated that he was not a little astonished at what he saw before him.

Leaning on his rifle, he looked first at the game, then at the young hunter, and finally he advanced and shook hands with him.

He was so nearly out of breath that he could not congratulate him upon his success in any other way.

In a few hurried words Oscar told what he had done since parting from Big Thompson three hours before, dwelling with a good deal of enthusiasm upon the courage displayed by the sheep in attacking the wolves, and winding up with the remark that he had no idea that so timid an animal could make so gallant a fight.

"Wal," replied Big Thompson, who had by

this time recovered a little of his breath, "they aint by no means as skeery as ye think. It's a fact that they'll ginerally run like the wind if they see a man or get a sniff of him, but they don't mind facin' any varmints they ketch on their feedin'-grounds. If you should happen to get one of 'em cornered, he'd double ye up quicker'n ye could say 'Gineral Jackson.' I knowed a feller onct who was larruped by an old doe whose lamb he wanted for his dinner, an' that thar feller was jest my size, an' they called him Big Thompson."

"I never heard of such a thing before," said Oscar, who had always believed that nothing inferior in strength to a bear or panther could get the better of his stalwart guide. "Tell us all about it."

"That's all thar is to tell. I plumped the lamb over fust; an' the doe, she run off. After follerin' her fur half a mile I found her ag'in, and knocked her over, too; but I didn't kill her. When I went to take her by the horns she jumped up an' give me a whack that laid me out flatter'n a slap-jack. When

I kinder come to myself, about an hour afterward. I found her standin' over her lamb; an' that time I made sure work of her. Now, perfessor, what be ye goin' to do next?"

"I want to get this game to the camp with as little delay as possible," answered Oscar. "I have a good deal of work before me, and I can do it now easier than I can after the specimens are frozen. But how are we going to get them to the cabin? Why, those sheep must weigh two or three hundred pounds apiece."

Oscar had been revolving this problem in his mind while his guide was climbing the bluff, and it puzzled him not a little; but Big Thompson solved it without an instant's hesitation.

CHAPTER XXV.

OSCAR DISCOVERS SOMETHING.

"I BELIEVE you hunters generally make a litter to carry your game home on, don't you?" continued Oscar.

"We do sometimes, when thar's two fellers to tote it," replied Big Thompson.

"Well, there are two of us here; but I never could carry one end of a litter with all those animals piled on it. The distance is too great and the load would be too heavy."

"Yes, I reckon seven or eight hundred pounds would be a pretty good lift for a chap of your inches, an' yer a mighty well put up sort of a boy, too. We'll have to snake 'em thar."

"That would never do," returned Oscar, quickly. "It would spoil the skins to haul the game so far over the snow."

"They shan't tech the snow at all. I'll tell ye what I mean."

Big Thompson gave the boy his rifle to hold, and, with the hatchet he always carried in his belt, cut down a small pine tree, which was to be used as a drag.

With the aid of this drag they succeeded, after infinite trouble, and two hours' hard work, in transferring all the game from the plateau to the mouth of the gorge.

One of the big-horns was then placed on the drag and the guide started with it for the cabin, leaving Oscar to protect the rest from any hungry beast which might chance to pass that way.

The guide was obliged to make four trips between the gorge and the camp, and, as it was no easy work to haul the drag and its heavy burdens through the snow, two hours more were consumed, so that it was near the middle of the afternoon before Oscar saw his specimens safely housed.

After full justice had been done to the cutlets, which, under Big Thompson's supervision, were cooked to perfection, Oscar set to work

upon one of the sheep, while the guide sat by, smoking his pipe and watching all his movements with the keenest interest.

At midnight Oscar was tired enough to go to bed. He slept soundly until eight o'clock the next morning; and then awoke, to find that the fire had nearly gone out, that the breakfast that had been prepared for him was cold, and that the guide was missing.

"He's gone out to set some of his traps," said Oscar to himself, as he drew on his boots and went out to get an armful of wood from the pile in front of the cabin. "He told me last night that that was what he was going to do to-day. Well, I have three or four hours more of hard work before me; and, when it is done, I'll take a stroll down the valley and see what I can find to shoot at."

In a very few minutes the fire was burning brightly; and, after he had washed his hands and face, and brushed his hair in front of a small mirror that hung on the wall (he never neglected such little things as these simply because he was a hunter, and a hundred miles away from everybody except his guide), Oscar

placed the coffee-pot and frying-pan on the coals, and laid the table for his breakfast.

He had brought with him a good many things in the way of supplies that Big Thompson had never seen in a hunter's camp before, such as condensed milk, pressed tea, sugar, self-leavening flour, canned fruits, pickles, onions, beans, and desiccated potatoes.

It was just as easy, he thought, to live well, even in that remote region, as it was to keep himself neat in appearance; and he intended to do both.

Having eaten a hearty breakfast and set things in order in the cabin, Oscar resumed work upon his specimens; and, by twelve o'clock, the skins of the sheep, as well as those of the wolves, were packed snugly away in one corner, surmounted by the horns he intended to present to his friend, Sam Hynes.

This done, he buckled on his cartridge-belt, thrust a hatchet into it, and, taking his rifle down from its place over the door, set out for a hunt by himself.

Before deciding on his course, he stopped to see which way the wind was blowing. On

glancing at the boughs of the evergreens behind the cabin, he observed that they hung motionless; there did not seem to be a breath of air stirring; but the boy, knowing that there is always more or less motion in the atmosphere, took a hunter's way of finding out which direction the breeze came from.

This he did by moistening his finger in his mouth and holding it above his head. The back of his finger was toward the upper end of the valley; and, as it grew cold almost instantly, Oscar knew that what little wind there was, came from the mountains. He knew, too, that experienced hunters, while seeking for game, always travel against the wind; so, without further hesitation, he shouldered his rifle and started up the valley.

"The elk we saw on the day we arrived here went in this direction," thought he, as he trudged along, keeping just in the edge of the timbers for concealment; "and who knows but I may be lucky enough to find them again? If I could get a fair shot at the old buck that carries those splendid antlers, I should have a prize indeed!"

Oscar worked his way cautiously through the woods, stopping now and then behind a convenient tree to take a survey of the valley before him, but not a living thing could he see.

All the game-animals seemed to have taken themselves off to a safer neighborhood; but that some of them had recently been about there was made apparent to Oscar before he had gone two miles from the cabin.

All of a sudden, while his thoughts were wandering far away from the valley, across the snow-covered prairie to the little village of Eaton and the friends he had left there, he came upon the place where a couple of deer had passed the preceding night.

He knew there were two of them, a large and a small one, for he could see the prints made by their bodies in the snow when they lay down to sleep.

He was satisfied, also, that they had left their beds that morning, for the appearance of the tracks that led to and from the thicket in which they had passed the night, told him so.

It had thawed just enough the day before to melt the top of the snow, and during the night it had frozen hard enough to form a thick crust over it.

The bottom of the tracks that led into the thicket was covered with this crust, while in those that led out of it the snow was soft to the touch.

Oscar was hunter enough to settle this matter, but it needed the skill of a more experienced person to determine how long the deer had been gone, and whether or not it would be worth while to pursue them.

"These tracks were not made by elk, because they are too small," thought the boy, stooping down and looking through the trees on all sides of him, although he knew perfectly well that the animals that made the tracks were a long way from there at that moment. "They couldn't have been made by common deer, either, for they're too deep. There must have been heavy bodies on top of those little feet to sink them to such a depth in the snow. I wonder if they could have been made by black-tails? I wish Thompson was here."

But Big Thompson was not there, and consequently if there was anything done toward securing the deer, whatever their name might be, Oscar must do it alone and unaided.

He did not expect to be successful in his efforts, but that did not deter him from taking up the trail at once.

Breaking into a rapid trot, which he had been known to sustain for three or four miles without the least inconvenience, he followed the tracks out of the timber and across the valley toward the brook.

When he reached the stream he found that the deer had spent considerable time there, browsing among the willows, for a good many branches were broken down, twigs and leaves were scattered about over the snow, and the two trails ran across each other in every direction; but, by devoting himself entirely to the tracks made by the larger animal, the young hunter succeeded in following him through all his devious windings, and he finally trailed him out of the willows and back across the valley to the timber that grew at the foot of the hills.

Here he stopped, discouraged.

"It's no use," said he, as he looked about for a fallen log on which he could sit down and rest for a few minutes. "I have followed this trail for two hours and a half," he added, consulting his watch, "and now I must give it up. They were frightened at something as they passed along here, and began to run. Their tracks show that very plainly, and Thompson says that if a black-tail once makes up his mind that it is necessary for him to show his speed, he will keep it up until—— Hello! what's that?"

While Oscar was looking around for a seat, he discovered something he was not looking for, and that was another trail, that led diagonally across the valley from the willows until it struck the trail of the deer, a few yards from the spot on which he stood, and then it turned and followed in the direction in which the game had fled.

Oscar ran up to this trail and examined it with no little interest. It was made by a man—a big man, too, judging by the size of his feet—and he wore moccasins.

The distance between his tracks showed that he had broken into a run the moment he struck the trail, and this made it evident that he had decided to pursue the deer.

"Aha!" said Oscar, shouldering his rifle, and once more setting off at his best pace, "Thompson has the start of me this time. But I can't imagine how he comes to be here, for I understood him to say that he was going *down* the valley to the place where we saw that otter-slide. I'll not go back to camp until I find him."

Oscar now had an opportunity to make some estimate of the speed his guide could put forth when occasion rendered it necessary. He must be set on springs that recoiled sharply whenever his feet touched the ground, Oscar thought, for his tracks were so far apart that the boy could scarcely step into them.

Furthermore, he kept up the same pace without intermission for two long, weary miles; and then Oscar began to realize that Big Thompson could run long as well as rapidly.

The boy was nearly out of breath by this

time; and, after a short burst of speed, made with the hope of coming within sight of his guide, he settled down into a walk.

As he moved slowly along, some things Big Thompson had told him in regard to mule-deer came into his mind.

The guide had informed him that in vigilance this animal was fully equal to the mountain sheep, and that in cunning he could give a fox points and beat him.

One of the favorite tricks of an experienced old buck was this: when he became aware that he was pursued, he would run like the wind until he was certain that he had gained a good start of his enemy, then take a short circle to the right or left of his trail, run back a mile or two parallel with and a short distance from it, and finally stop on some hill, from whose summit he could see the country over which he had just passed without being seen himself. When he discovered the hunter advancing along the trail below him, he would take to his heels again, only to repeat the trick a few minutes later.

It was the recollection of this piece of infor-

mation that caused Oscar to turn his head and look toward a ridge on his right hand, that terminated in a bluff, about fifty feet in height.

As he did so, his eyes opened to their widest extent, and his hands trembled as he took his gun from his shoulder, and laid it in the hollow of his arm.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE RIVAL HUNTERS.

THE top of the ridge was thickly covered with bushes, and it was something Oscar imagined he saw behind those bushes that caused his eyes to open, and set his hands to trembling violently.

Arising above the top of the thicket was an object that looked for all the world like a pair of wide-spreading antlers ; and on the ground could be dimly seen another object, that greatly resembled a doe lying down.

A person whose eyes were less keen than Oscar's might have looked toward the top of the ridge a score of times without seeing anything but bushes there ; but the young hunter was positive that the deer he had been following were stationed within easy range of him, closely watching all his movements.

Why did he not bolt at once and shoot at

them? For the reason that he knew that so long as he kept moving, and the animals fancied themselves unobserved, they would remain motionless in their place of concealment; but the instant he came to a stand-still, they would take the alarm and show him their heels. Besides, he wanted to obtain a better view of them, if he could, to gain a favorable position for a shot, and to make sure that they were really live deer, and not creatures of his imagination.

With these thoughts in his mind, Oscar walked slowly along the trail, keeping his eyes fixed upon the shrubbery.

In a few seconds another cluster of bushes shut the doe out of his sight. This seemed to cause her some uneasiness, for she promptly arose to her feet and moved nearer to the buck, so that she could look through the tops of the bushes at the hunter. It was plain that she thought it best to keep her eyes on him.

The buck, at the same time, shifted his own position very slightly, and thus brought himself in front of an opening in the thicket,

through which Oscar saw that he could obtain a fatal, or at least a disabling shot.

These movements on the part of the game removed all doubts from the mind of the young hunter.

He was looking at live deer, and nothing else.

Still keeping his gaze fixed upon the animals, he moved along the trail about ten yards further; and, when he had taken an extra cartridge from his belt, he faced about and walked back, at the same time drawing the rifle to his face.

He kept the weapon directed toward the top of the ridge; and, when the muzzle of it came within range of that clear space in the bushes, he pressed the trigger.

An instant afterward there was a great commotion behind the thicket. A cloud of snow and deep leaves flew into the air, raised by the doe as she bounded high in her tracks and sought safety in flight, and by the hind feet of the buck, which, giving one convlusive spring, came crashing through the tops of the bushes, and rolled down the bluff, landing in a heap,

almost at the feet of the hunter, who jumped quickly to one side to avoid the blows from the sharp little hoofs that were flourished so spitefully in the air.

But his struggles did not long continue. He was hard hit; and, by the time Oscar had thrown the empty shell out of his rifle and put in the cartridge he held in his hand, the buck was stone dead.

The report of his gun awoke a thousand echoes, which reverberated among the rocks and gorges until it seemed as if a dozen answering shots were coming from as many different points of the compass, and fell upon the ears of a man who, carrying his rifle at a trail, moving with long, swinging strides, and keeping his eyes fastened upon the tracks in the snow, was making his way through a dense thicket a quarter of a mile distant.

He stopped suddenly when he heard it; and, having made sure of the direction from which the report came, he uttered an exclamation indicative of astonishment and anger; and, turning short off from the trail, ran at the top of his speed toward the valley.

Arriving at the edge of the timber, he peeped cautiously through the bushes, and saw Oscar standing below him, leaning on his rifle and looking at the prize he had secured.

The hunter either recognized in him somebody against whom he held a grudge, or else he was enraged over the loss of the game he had so long and perseveringly followed; for he raised his rifle to his face and pointed it at the boy as if he had half a mind to drop him as Oscar had dropped the mule-deer.

It was probable, however, that he had no such intention, for he did not cock his gun. He was only acting out in pantomime what he would have been glad to do in reality, if he had not been afraid of the consequences.

Just then Oscar raised his head and set up a shout that once more put the echoes at work among the hills. The sound seemed to startle the concealed hunter, for he straightened up quickly and cast suspicious glances behind and on both sides of him, at the same time straining his ears to catch the reply, if any were given.

After looking and listening for two or three

moments he again brought his rifle to a trail, glided away as noiselessly as a spirit, making use of every tree and rock to conceal his progress, and presently he was lost to sight in the depths of the woods.

"Who—whoop!" yelled Oscar again, when he thought he had waited long enough for a reply. "Where is Thompson, I wonder? If he can't hear the call he ought certainly to have heard the report of the gun, and I don't see why he doesn't answer it. That was the agreement between us. If we were hunting out of sight of each other he was to reply to my shot, and come to me at once. I'll try him again."

Oscar looked around for some mark upon which to exercise his skill, and discovering a white spot on a tree fifty yards away, took a quick aim at it, and had the satisfaction of seeing the centre of the spot disappear.

The echoes answered as before, but the boy heard nothing that sounded like the sharp, whip-like report of Big Thompson's muzzle-loader.

He shouted until he was hoarse, but no

reply came back to him save the sound of his own voice thrown back from the cliffs.

"I think I'd better not waste any more time," said Oscar, after he had waited nearly half an hour for the guide to make his appearance. "If he comes back this way he will, of course, strike my trail, and he is such a runner that it will not take him long to come up with me. Now, the next thing is to find a drag."

Slinging his rifle over his shoulder, Oscar drew his hatchet from his belt; and, after a short search among the saplings in front of him, selected one that he thought would answer his purpose.

A few blows with the hatchet brought it to the ground; and, when some of the useless branches had been cut off, the buck was placed upon it—not without a good deal of hard work, however, during which Oscar's strength was all brought into requisition—and the hunter set out for camp well satisfied with his success.

It was a task of no little difficulty to haul so heavy a burden through the snow, and Oscar was often obliged to stop and rest.

During every one of these halts he renewed his efforts to attract the attention of his guide by shouting and firing his gun, but still no answer was returned.

Just as it was growing dark he reached the cabin; and, with a sigh of relief, put his rifle in its place, and sat down on one of the stools to take another good look at his prize.

After resting a few moments, he took a tape-line from one of the pockets of his saddle-bags and proceeded to make some measurements.

Here is the entry he made in his diary—or, rather, a portion of it:

I have to-day secured my first specimen of the—I don't know whether to call it *Cervus columbianus* or *Cariacus columbianus*, or *Cariacus macrotis;* for no two authorities I have read agree on that point. If he is a deer at all, he belongs to the family *Cervidæ*, and therefore ought to be called *Cervus* something. Who knows but I may some day be an authority on these little matters myself? He is a mule-deer; I know that much, and his dimensions are as follows: spread of antlers, fifty inches; fourteen well-developed prongs. Height, five feet four inches from the ground to tip of antlers; at the haunches, three feet eight inches. Length of ears, a fraction over eight inches. Body, round and plump; legs very slender; feet so small that

they seem greatly disproportioned to the size of the animal. Color of coat a dark gray, tipped with black, changing to yellow and white on the breast and flanks, and to a tawny on the legs. Tail, thin and switchy; white at the top, and terminating in a black brush three inches in length. Weight, about two hundred and fifty pounds.

After Oscar had made this entry, and while he was sitting with his elbow on his knee and his chin resting on his hand, looking down at the deer to see if there were any points about him that he had not noted, he heard footsteps breaking through the crust outside the cabin; and the next moment the door opened, admitting Big Thompson, who carried something slung over his shoulder. He stopped on the threshold and uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"What have you got there?" inquired Oscar.

The guide handed over his bunch of game, consisting of an otter and several mink, for his employer's inspection, and turned his attention to the deer, which he examined with considerable interest.

"Ye'll never get a better one, if ye stay

here till yer har's as white as the driven snow," said he. "'Taint often ye see a black-tail larger'n this yere. An' I think I heard ye say that ye didn't know nothin' 'bout huntin' big game."

"And I told you the truth," replied Oscar. "But I have paid strict attention to everything you said in regard to the habits of the animals found in these hills, and when I go hunting I make use of the information you have given me. I know enough to beat you, don't I?"

"Looks like it from here," answered the guide.

"And you had the start of me, too," continued Oscar. "I followed your trail until I was tired out, and then, happening to recall what you said regarding the habit a mule-deer has of doubling on his trail, I looked toward the top of a bluff a little distance off and there he was. That's the way I got him. What was the reason you didn't answer my signals?"

"Look a-here, perfessor," said the guide, drawing the other stool up on the opposite

side of the fire and seating himself, "what be ye tryin' to get through yerself?"

"Nothing at all. I am simply trying to make you understand that, while you were following the deer, I got the start of you."

"Whar did ye shoot him?" asked Big Thompson.

"About four miles up the valley. And you were there, too, for I saw your trail."

"Not much, ye didn't!" exclaimed the guide, who was very much surprised. "Kase why—I was five miles *down* the valley."

"You were?" said Oscar, now beginning to be surprised himself. "Then there's another hunter about here."

"Mebbe it was a bar track ye seed?" suggested the guide.

"Don't you suppose I can tell the print of a moccasin from a bear track?" inquired Oscar. "Of course, you don't know who he is."

"In course not; but I'll find out to-morrer, while yer fixin' up that black-tail. I allers like to know who my neighbors be. I know this much, howsomever. If this yere valley is gittin' settled up, it aint no place fur me an'

you. Somebody'll have to be movin'; but it won't be me an' the perfessor," he added to himself.

Oscar laughed outright. The idea that a hunting ground, covering over three hundred square miles, was too densely populated when there were only three hunters in it, amused him.

He did not object to the presence of a third party. On the contrary, if they chanced to meet him, and he proved to be the right sort of man, Oscar would have been in favor of inviting him to take up his abode in the cabin. He was a professional hunter, or he would not be in the hills at that season of the year, and he would have stories to tell that would help while away the long winter evenings.

Big Thompson had other ideas. He had suspicions also ; and, if he had communicated them to Oscar, it is probable that the boy would have thought as he did—that somebody would have to be moving.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BIG THOMPSON FOLLOWS A TRAIL.

BOTH the hunters had work to do that night; and, as soon as supper had been eaten, they set about it; Oscar devoting himself to the deer, while Big Thompson removed and stretched the skins of the otter and mink he had shot during the day.

The boy was so much interested in what his guide was doing that he made very little progress with his own task.

Big Thompson, having spent many a year in the woods before he became a government scout, was an expert in all that pertained to the trapping and preserving of skins, and he handled his knife with a dexterity that excited Oscar's admiration and envy.

His work being done at the end of an hour, he lighted his pipe and watched the boy until he grew sleepy, and then he bade him good-night and sought his blanket.

Nothing more was said about the unknown hunter, and Oscar never thought of him again until the next morning, when he awoke to find that the guide, after preparing breakfast for his employer, had taken his rifle and set off by himself.

"He has gone out to see who my rival was," thought Oscar, as he threw off the blankets and drew on his boots. "I hope he will find him and bring him here to live with us. There is room enough in the cabin for three, and there is game enough in the valley to keep us all busy. If he stays off there by himself, I am afraid he will shoot that big elk, and that would be a disappointment to me. After I have eaten breakfast, I'll take a stroll down the brook and see if I can find some of Thompson's traps. When I see how they are set, I'll put out some for myself. I might just as well earn a few extra dollars while I am here as not. I have spent a good deal of the committee's money that I had no business to spend, and every cent of it must be replaced."

Having disposed of a hearty breakfast—it was astonishing what an appetite the cold,

bracing air from the mountains gave him—Oscar shouldered his rifle and left the cabin.

He was gone all day; and when he came back, just before dark, he carried over his shoulder a fine bunch of mink and otter, which he had found in the guide's traps and dead-falls.

He had taken particular notice of the nature of the localities in which these traps and dead-falls were set, and thought he had learned enough to warrant him in beginning the business of trapping on his own responsibility.

Big Thompson had already returned, and supper was nearly ready.

"That's what I have done to-day," said Oscar, as he entered the cabin and exhibited his bunch of game. "Now, what have you done?"

"I've found out that we've got the country to our own two selves ag'in, like we'd oughter have," answered Big Thompson. "That feller has dug out."

"I am sorry to hear it," said Oscar. "I was in hopes you would find him and bring him back with you."

"I might have fetched him here if I'd found him, an' then ag'in I mightn't. I don't reckon ye'd make friends with every feller ye'd meet in the settlements, would ye? Wal, 'taint safe to do so out yere in the hills, nuther. Most likely he heared ye yellin' an' shootin' yesterday, an' has gone off to find more elbow-room."

"I should think he ought to have heard me, if he was anywhere within a mile of the valley," said Oscar, with a smile. "I tell you I awoke the echoes. But it seems to me that you fellows want a good deal of elbow-room. I wouldn't care if there were a dozen other hunters here. Do you know who he was?"

"I didn't see him," was the answer.

"But do you know who he was?" repeated Oscar, who saw something in his guide's manner which led him to the belief that he wasn't telling all he knew.

"Look a-yere, perfessor! Do ye s'pose I kin tell a man's name by seein' the size of his hoofs in the snow?" demanded Big Thompson. "No, I can't. My ole pop, when he larnt me trailin', never told me how to do that."

Oscar was entirely satisfied with the reply. He little imagined that the guide, although he uttered nothing but the truth when he affirmed that he had not seen the man, could, nevertheless, tell all about him.

When Big Thompson left the cabin, at the first peep of day, he bent his steps toward the bluff on which Oscar had killed the mule-deer; and, after an hour's rapid walking, found his trail, as well as that of the unknown hunter.

This he took up at once, and followed through all its numerous windings among the hills and gorges, until at last he came to the spot where the tracks, which had thus far been a good distance apart, were made in pairs.

"This is whar he stopped when he heared the perfessor's gun," said the guide to himself. "Then he went on a few steps an' stopped; then a leetle further, an' stopped ag'in, an' that's the way the tracks were made so clost together. Finally, he branched off this yere way, t'wards the bluff, to see who it was a-shootin' down thar in the valley."

Big Thompson also "branched off" at this point, following the trail to the edge of the

timber; and, by taking his stand behind the same cluster of bushes that had served the unknown hunter for a concealment, he could see the spot on which Oscar stood while he was examining his prize.

Taking up the trail again, he pursued it at a swifter pace, his knowledge of woodcraft enabling him to pick out every tree and bowlder behind which the hunter had stopped to survey the ground before him; and, after another hour's rapid travelling, came within sight of a smouldering camp-fire.

He ran up to it at once; and, dropping the butt of his rifle to the ground, halted to take a survey of its surroundings.

The guide had already told himself who Oscar's rival was; and, if there were any lingering doubts in his mind as to his identity, they were now all dispelled.

The hastily constructed shelter, under which the snow was almost as deep as it was in the woods, the carcasses of the wolves that were scattered about, and the whole untidy and neglected appearance of the camp, fully satisfied him that he had made no mistake.

A plain trail led away from the camp, and this had been made by two persons (one of whom wore boots) and an unshod pony.

The owners of the camp had eaten an early breakfast, and set out to find less populous hunting grounds.

The guide followed their trail until he had made sure of their direction, which he knew to be another valley among the hills a few miles away, and then he turned about and retraced his steps.

"I understand sunthin' now that I didn't quite see into afore," thought he. "Lish knowed that me an' the perfessor would be sartin to strike fur this valley, and that's why he put that thar writin' on to Ike Barker's door. He reckoned that if Ike tuk back his muel, as a'most any other feller would 'a' done, that would knock us in the head, an' him an' his pardner would have the country to themselves. But that thar leetle game didn't work, did it, Lish? I knowed it was yerself the minute I seed yer trail a-dodgin' ahind all them trees an' rocks. Ye knowed the perfessor was a-hollerin' fur me, an' ye didn't want to see

me, did ye? No; I reckon ye didn't—kase why, when we set eyes on to each other, we'll pull ha'r, me an' you will."

The guide did not explain all this to his employer, because he knew, as well as if Oscar himself had told him so, that there was something between him and Lish the Wolfer, or between him and his partner, whoever he might be.

When Oscar read the note the ranchman found fastened to his door, he was nearly overwhelmed with excitement, or something else, and the guide had noticed it. So had Ike Barker, and the two had discussed the matter after the boy fell asleep in his bunk; but, of course, without arriving at any solution of the mystery.

It was plain enough to Big Thompson that his young employer knew more about one or the other of these two worthies than he cared to reveal; but he had never said anything to him about it, for he knew that it was no concern of his.

If Oscar were in need of his assistance, and chose to take him into his confidence, he would

give him all the help he could. Until then he would keep his mouth closed.

This was the way Big Thompson looked at the matter, and the conclusions at which he arrived showed that he was as expert at following out a course of reasoning as he was at following a trail.

During the next three weeks our hunters employed their time in much the same way that they had employed it during the three days the incidents of which we have so minutely described. They had come out there to hunt and trap; and they went about their business as regularly as a carpenter or a book-keeper goes about his daily work.

Oscar passed one day in stalking some of the numerous herds of elk that roamed in the upper end of the valley, and the next in visiting traps he had set along the banks of the brook.

Good luck attended all his efforts except in two, or, we may say, three instances. He never went out after the elk that he did not succeed in bringing down one; and, whenever he made the round of his traps, he always

brought to the cabin at least half a dozen, and sometimes more, valuable fur-bearing animals.

He had secured another mule-deer—a doe—which was a fit companion for the buck he had killed; he had prepared for mounting several fine specimens of the beaver, otter, mink, and marten tribes; he had knocked over two or three gray foxes, and a common wolf which he found feasting on a deer he had slain; he had bagged some representatives of all the game-birds with which the woods were inhabited; and the pile of furs he intended to sell, and which grew larger every day, satisfied him that he could refund every dollar of the committee's money that he had advanced to assist Leon Parker and his brother Tom, and have a handsome surplus left to put into his own pocket.

These things made his heart light and his sleep sound; but he became nervous and impatient when he reflected that, with all his careful stalking, he had not been able to get a shot at that big elk with the splendid antlers; that he could not obtain so much as a glimpse

of the thieving wolverine which was making a business of robbing his traps, or of the panther which serenaded him and his companion nearly every night.

The guide, who had heard so much about that big elk that he became as anxious to secure him as Oscar was, advised the boy to run him down on horseback; and at last Oscar consented to try it.

Then he found that he had missed a good deal of sport during the time he had devoted to still-hunting.

An elk, when he is disturbed by a hunter, makes off at a trot which is the very poetry of easy and vigorous motion.

So rapid is his pace, and so long-winded is he, that the hunter who would overtake him must be mounted on a fleet and enduring horse; and, furthermore, he must push him hard enough at the start to make him "break his trot"—that is, compel him to change his gait to a gallop.

Although he can trot twenty miles without showing any signs of fatigue, going up the side of a mountain, or through a dense forest,

where the way is obstructed by rocks and fallen trees, with as much ease, apparently, as he would pass over an open prairie, a short gallop—even on the smoothest ground—exhausts him; and then the hunter can ride close enough to him to use his rifle or revolver.

Oscar knew all this, for his guide had more than once explained it to him.

Hunting on horseback was easier than hunting on foot; and, after his first day in the saddle, Oscar never went elk-stalking again.

He lived on horseback during the daytime, for he always rode the guide's pony; the guide himself rode the mule.

This much-abused animal, although he was the very personification of laziness and obstinacy when hitched to the wagon, was all life and animation when he had a rider on his back.

He proved to be very light of foot; and, on more than one occasion, tested the speed of the pony to the utmost.

He was very knowing, too, and it was not many days before Oscar found it out. If it had not been for that same mule this expedi-

tion would have ended in failure, in spite of the success that had thus far attended them.

He did something that raised him to a high place in the boy's estimation; and anybody who struck that mule a blow after that, in his presence, would have been very likely to get himself into trouble.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"OLD EPHRAIM."

OSCAR and his guide enjoyed some splendid runs after they gave up still-hunting and took to the saddle; and Big Thompson, who had been surprised at the skill the boy exhibited in stalking, and the success that attended him, was perfectly astonished when he saw him ride.

His seat was easy and graceful; and, although he seemed to make no effort to keep it, he was never unhorsed. In the ardor of the chase he seemed to forget everything except the game before him.

With his bridle flying loose in the wind, and his hands grasping his rifle, which he carried ready for a shot, he would press close upon the flanks of a flying herd, single out the best buck in it, and follow him at headlong speed

through the thickest woods, over the roughest ground, and down declivities that in his sober moments he would have hesitated to descend at a walk; and when at last the elk's trot was broken and his spirit began to flag, the loud report of the breech loader would announce that that run was over.

It was surprising how soon he and the pony came to have unlimited confidence in each other. The little horse entered into the sport with as much eagerness as Oscar did; and he would face every thicket and take every leap that came in his way, all the while straining every nerve to bring his rider to close quarters with the animal he had selected. And it was surprising, too, how quickly he learned which animal it was that Oscar wanted to bring to bay.

After he had followed him through a few of his windings, guided by his rider's hand, he would take up the pursuit on his own responsibility, and stick close to that particular elk, paying no attention to the other members of the herd.

During these runs Thompson always kept

a little in the boy's rear, advising and encouraging him, except when that big elk was started, and then he would take the lead, if he could, and try his best to secure him; but this elk seemed to bear a charmed life.

A good many bullets had been sent after him, and sometimes the hunters were positive that he had been hard hit; but the next time they jumped him—and they saw him almost every time they went to the upper end of the valley—he would throw his heavy antlers back on his shoulders, stick his nose straight out before him, and trot off as rapidly as ever.

"I am afraid we'll have to give it up," said Oscar one day, as they were slowly working their way homeward after another unsuccessful attempt to bag the big elk.

They had not been entirely unsuccessful, for Oscar had brought down a specimen with which he would have been quite satisfied if he had never seen that other buck.

This specimen was slung across the mule's back. It was easier to get the game home in that way than it was to haul it on a drag.

"Look a-yere, perfessor!" exclaimed the

guide. "Ye said somethin' t'other day 'bout sendin' me back to the fort, didn't ye?"

"Yes, I did," replied Oscar. "There are several persons in the States who ought to know what I am doing out here; and besides, I believe there are letters for me at the fort."

"All right," said the guide. "Now jest take my advice, an' let that ole buck alone till I come back. If ye keep on foolin' with him the fust thing ye know he'll take that herd o' his'n off to some other valley, an' then ye'll have to give him up, sure. It's a wonder to me that he haint tuk 'em off long ago. If he stays yere we'll have him as sartin as he's a elk."

"If we can get him when you come back why can't we get him now?" asked Oscar.

"Kase we aint got what we want, that's why. I've got somethin' to hum that'll fetch a muel-deer every time; an' seems to me that it had oughter fetch that thar buck too. When I come back I'll bring it with me."

"What in the world is it?"

"Wal, now, perfessor, if I promise ye,

honor bright, that ye shall have that thar buck to take back to the States with ye, hadn't ye oughter be satisfied with that?"

Oscar thought he had, but still it was hard work to control his curiosity.

The boy had often talked of sending his guide to the fort to mail some letters he had written, and to bring back any addressed to himself that the colonel might have in his possession; and Big Thompson had as often declared his readiness to start as soon as the weather and the travelling would permit.

There had been several days during the last three weeks on which it stormed so violently that the hunters were confined within doors.

Oscar passed those stormy days in writing letters, and jotting down in his diary the particulars of such hunting expeditions as he thought worth preserving, while the guide smoked his pipe and meditated.

After these storms the guide's chances for making the journey seemed greatly lessened.

The snow was now more than a foot deep on

a level in the valley; and Big Thompson said that in the gorges, and on the exposed prairie, where the wind had a full sweep, the drifts must be twenty feet deep.

"An' the longer I wait the wuss the goin' will git," said he, as he lay on his blanket that night, watching Oscar, who was busy with the elk he had shot during the day. "I'll try it to-morrer."

And he did.

When it was four o'clock by Oscar's watch breakfast had been disposed of, and the guide, having provided himself with a few pounds of crackers and several slices of cooked venison—all of which he wrapped up in his blankets, and carried over his shoulder, slung on his rifle's barrel—left the cabin in company with his employer, and led the way toward the gulch that ran from the valley to the prairie.

But he did not go far into the gulch. It was filled with drifts, and one glance at them was enough for Oscar, who urged the guide to give it up and go back to the cabin.

"It would not be many days," he said, "before a crust would form over the newly

fallen snow, and then he could make the attempt with every hope of success."

But Big Thompson, being made of sterner stuff, declared that, having got so far on his way, he would not turn back until he was compelled to do so.

He asked Oscar to repeat the messages he wished to send to the various officers at the post, told him to go straight back to the cabin, and be very careful of himself during his absence, and then shook him warmly by the hand and set out on his lonely journey.

The boy watched him as long as he remained in sight, but instead of going back to camp, as he had been told to do, he built a fire under the bluff, and sat down beside it to await the guide's return.

"He'll be back pretty soon," thought Oscar, "and I wish I had brought the coffee-pot with me, for he will need something to refresh him."

Sure enough, Big Thompson returned just before noon (it was a little after daylight when he took leave of his employer), covered with snow from head to foot, and as nearly exhausted as a man like him could be.

The snow was so deep and soft that he had gone scarcely five miles up the gorge before he was glad to turn back.

It was a fortunate thing for him that he did so, for on the very next day the weather suddenly changed, and a "blizzard," such as Big Thompson himself had not often seen, and which continued for thirty-six hours, roared through the hills.

If the guide had gone on toward the fort the storm would have overtaken him on the prairie; and Oscar might have been left to pass the rest of the winter alone, and to find his own way out of the hills in the spring.

On the fourth day the skies cleared, and the guide, who had made a pair of snow shoes, was ready to set out again as soon as he saw indications of settled weather.

The snow in the valley was too deep for hunting on horseback, and Oscar and his companion were obliged to go on foot.

The first day on which the weather permitted them to go out of doors they spent in making the rounds of their traps, one going up and the other down the valley, and the

next they passed in company, hunting for nothing in particular, but ready to knock over any animal that came in their way, provided he was worth a charge of powder and lead.

It was on the afternoon of this day that our hero saw a sight he did not soon forget.

He and his companion, after taking lunch on the bank of the brook, set out to beat a thick grove in the upper end of the valley, in which the herds of elk always sought concealment when pressed by the hunters.

Oscar had been instructed to follow the stream, which here ran through a wide but shallow gorge, while the guide made a circuit of a mile or two, crossed the gorge at the upper edge of the timbers, and came down on the other side, hoping to drive something within reach of the boy's breech loader.

Neither of them had had a chance for a shot during the day, and everything seemed to indicate that they were destined to go home empty-handed.

Oscar had been out of sight of the guide for an hour or more. He was walking slowly up the gorge, moving with that stealthy step

which he had practised so often that it was becoming a confirmed habit with him, and as he rounded the base of a lofty rock, under whose cover he had stopped a few minutes to listen and peep through the wood on each side of him, he found himself on the brow of a little hill, and within less than twenty yards of an enormous grizzly bear.

The boy knew that the animal belonged to this species, because he could distinctly see the erect mane between the shoulders, the dark stripe extending along the back from the base of the skull to the tail, the white tips of the brownish-yellow hair with which the body was covered, the pale muzzle, and the huge feet, with their sabre-like claws.

The animal was lying down on the sunny side of an overhanging rock, but he was not asleep.

His head was raised, his eyes were fastened upon a thicket on the opposite side of the little glade in which the rock stood, and his whole attitude indicated that he was listening intently.

A moment after Oscar discovered him he

arose to his feet, and the mane between his shoulders bristled like the hair on the back of an angry dog's neck.

The young hunter's heart seemed to stop beating. If the bear had looked large while he was lying down he looked four times larger when he got up.

How any man could willingly risk his life in an encounter with a beast like that Oscar could not understand.

Trembling with fear lest the bear should suddenly turn his head and discover him, Oscar drew back quickly behind his rock, whispering softly to himself :

"It is Old Ephraim, as sure as the world !"

This was the name that Big Thompson almost invariably applied to an animal of this species. He seldom called it a grizzly.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A LUCKY SHOT.

IN none of his hunting excursions had Oscar ever been very badly troubled by what is known as the "buck-fever." It is true that the sight of big game always startled him at first, but when the time came to shoot his hands were as steady as those of Big Thompson himself.

On this occasion, however, all his nerve seemed to desert him completely. Slowly and cautiously he moved out from behind his rock, and, raising his rifle to his shoulder, tried to bring the sights within range of a spot behind the bear's fore shoulder, near the region of his heart; but the weapon swayed about like a sapling in a gale of wind, and in two seconds' time he had covered every inch of that side of the bear's body except the one at which he wished to shoot.

"This will never do!" thought Oscar, drawing in a long breath, as if he hoped in that way to calm his agitated nerves and stop the rapid beating of his heart, which now thumped loudly against his ribs. "If I don't kill him dead, or disable him at the first shot, my life is not worth a row of pins. If I stay here, or run, it's an even chance if he don't discover me and assume the offensive. I don't know what to do."

Oscar drew himself a little further back behind his rock, and took a moment in which to think the matter over.

He could not shoot; he dared not retreat; and he was afraid to stay where he was. It looked as though he had got himself into a tight place.

It has been said by those who ought to know, for they have "been there," that when a person is drowning the whole of his life passes in review before him, like the scenes of a panorama; and Oscar could now affirm, from personal experience, that a boy who unexpectedly finds himself in the presence of a full-grown grizzly has to pass through the same ordeal.

He did, at any rate. He seemed to remember everything he had ever done. Scenes and incidents long since forgotten, and which he had hoped would never be recalled to him, flashed through his mind like lightning.

His heart beat loudly and more rapidly than before, and Oscar became thoroughly frightened when he found that his strength was all leaving him. His rifle seemed to weigh a ton, and he gladly would have laid it down if he had not been afraid of attracting the bear's attention.

All this while the grizzly stood motionless in his tracks, looking toward the thicket on the opposite side of the glade and listening. He did not appear to be aware of the boy's presence, for he never once turned his gaze in his direction ; but it was plain that something had aroused his suspicions.

Knowing that it would be the height of folly to risk a shot while his nerves were in that condition, the boy also turned his head toward the thicket ; but his senses were not as keen as those of the bear, and he could neither see, hear, nor smell anything.

There was something approaching that clus-

ter of bushes, however, and Oscar found it out a few moments later.

All of a sudden a tall figure glided out from behind a tree, and Big Thompson, carrying his rifle at a trail, and keeping his eyes fastened on the snow, moved out into plain view.

Then Oscar saw, for the first time, that the bear's trail led from that thicket to his den under the rock. The guide, whom the boy supposed to be a mile away at that moment, had found it and was following it up.

He was running right into danger too. His eyes being fastened on the trail, he did not see the bear, which was as close to him as it was to Oscar. At least that was what Oscar thought; but, as it happened, the wary old hunter knew where the bear was as well as his employer did.

The boy's fears were greatly increased now. For a moment he seemed utterly incapable of moving or speaking; and then, his power of action and speech coming back to him as suddenly as it had deserted him, he sprang to his feet and raised a shout that could have been heard half a mile away.

"Look out there, Thompson!" he yelled. "The bear is right in front of you!"

There is nothing of which the grizzly stands so much in fear as the sound of the human voice.

Numerous instances are on record bearing evidence to the fact that men who have been stricken down and seriously wounded by these fierce animals have saved their lives by setting up piercing shrieks of pain and terror.

This grizzly proved to be as timid as any of his species in this respect. When Oscar's shout awoke the echoes of the grove he turned quickly; and, giving vent to a hoarse "huff, huff!" which resembled, in everything except volume, the sound uttered by a wild hog when he is suddenly startled, made all haste to get around the rock out of sight; but before he had taken half a dozen steps he was floored by a bullet from Big Thompson's rifle.

Now it so happened that this veteran hunter was quite as much disconcerted at the sound of Oscar's voice as the grizzly was. He never dreamed that the boy was anywhere in that vicinity; and if he had held his peace a

moment longer the guide would have given a much better account of himself.

As it was, Oscar's shout of warning disturbed his aim; and instead of killing the bear outright, as he could have done under almost any other circumstances, he only succeeded in inflicting upon him a painful wound, which aroused all the ferocity in his nature at once.

He got upon his feet in an instant, and, uttering growls of rage that made Oscar shiver all over, charged toward the hunter, whose coolness and courage were wonderful to behold.

Having no time to recharge his muzzle loader, Thompson grasped the barrel with both hands, and, swinging the heavy weapon over his head, calmly awaited the onset.

It was a picture for a painter; and on the brow of the hill a little distance away was another picture for that same painter, if he wanted something to represent "Fright."

There stood Oscar, with open mouth and staring eyes, watching all that was going on below him, and so utterly overcome with terror

that he did not know he had a gun in his hands.

Down came the guide's rifle with tremendous force, and the anxious spectator held his breath in suspense while he awaited the result of the stroke. He fully expected to see the bear tumbled over with a broken head, for it did not seem possible that anything in the shape of a skull could withstand a blow like that.

It was simply terrific. The stock of the rifle, broken short off at the grip, flew ten feet away in one direction, while the barrel, slipping from the hunter's hand, went whirling through the air in another.

The blow checked the bear for perhaps ten seconds, just long enough to give Big Thompson time enough to gather himself for a jump.

He made half a dozen of them—wonderful jumps they were, too—directing his course toward the hill on which Oscar stood, with the intention of seizing one of the overhanging branches and swinging himself out of the reach of his enraged enemy; but he had not calculated on the depth of the snow, and the

Oscar saves Big Thompson's Life.

first thing he knew he was floundering in a drift that was waist deep.

He was wedged in so tightly that he could scarcely move, while the bear's superior strength and weight enabled him to work his way through it without the least difficulty.

The fierce animal closed in rapidly upon the now helpless hunter, and Oscar's first impulse was to take to his heels, in order that he might not see that which would surely follow when the bear came up with him.

But instead of acting upon it he did something else—something that excited Big Thompson's unqualified admiration, and caused Oscar himself the most unbounded astonishment whenever he thought of it afterward.

He drew his gun to his shoulder, and the solid rock beside which he stood was not steadier than the muzzle of that weapon.

Taking a quick aim at the butt of the bear's ear, near the place where the spine joins the base of the skull, he pressed the trigger, and the enraged animal fell as if he had been struck by lightning.

So did Oscar, who, as soon as he saw the

result of his shot, sunk down beside the rock, at the same time letting go his hold upon his gun, which slid, muzzle foremost, down the hill, and buried itself almost out of sight in the snow.

For a moment or two after that Oscar must have been unconscious. He did not see the guide move; but when he looked toward him again Big Thompson had worked his way out of the drift; and, having picked up the barrel of his rifle, was searching for the stock.

Seeing Oscar sitting at the foot of the rock, he called out to him in a cheery voice:

"Wal, perfessor, if ye haint done it fur Ole Ephraim this time I'm an Injun. What be ye sittin' up thar fur? Come down an' take a look at him."

The boy tried to obey. With great difficulty he arose to an upright position; but his legs refusing to support him, he rolled helplessly down the hill and landed in a snow-drift, from which he was extricated by Big Thompson, who placed him firmly upon his feet.

"Why, perfessor!" he exclaimed with some anxiety, as he gazed into the boy's pale

face; "what's the matter of ye? Thar aint no color into ye at all."

"I don't wonder that I look white," panted Oscar. "I never before was so badly frightened. I haven't a particle of strength. I thought you were a goner, sure."

"Me too," said Big Thompson cheerfully.

"I must say that you took it very coolly. You didn't show the least fear. Your face isn't white."

"Wal, arter ye have been knocked about the mountains an' prairies, an' been snowed an' rained an' blowed on as often as I have, ye won't show much white neither," was the reply. "Of all the tenderfeet I ever seed yer the best. Put it thar!"

Oscar complied, and an instant afterward made the firm resolution that if he ever again did his guide a service he would not shake hands on the strength of it.

The hunter's long, bony fingers closed over his palm with almost crushing force, and it was a long time before he forgot the terrible shaking up that followed. This was Big Thompson's way of showing his gratitude.

"Now," continued the latter, as he resumed the search for the stock of his rifle, "thar's nigh on to a thousand pound of bone an' muscle into that thar feller, an' it would take us a week to drag him to the shanty ; so I say let's camp here till ye fix him up for stuffin'. We aint got no blankets, but we've both got hatchets, an' firewood is plenty."

Oscar was only too glad to give his consent to this arrangement. He was so weak from fright that the bare thought of walking to the cabin made him feel as though he wanted to sit down and take a long rest.

Big Thompson evidently understood just how he felt, for he straightway proceeded to strip the boughs from some of the evergreens that stood close by, and when he had piled these boughs under the overhanging rock he seated Oscar upon them.

After that he rolled the bear upon a drag, drew it up under the rock, and having started a roaring fire, picked up his employer's breech loader and went out to shoot something for supper.

"Ye needn't be oneasy, kase I shan't go

fur away," said he as he was about to set off. "I don't reckon ye feel so pert as usual arter seein' Ole Eph with his dander riz, so I'll kinder keep within shootin' distance of ye."

Big Thompson disappeared in the grove, and Oscar, with that delicious feeling of relief and contentment which a weary traveller experiences when he reaches his comfortable home and sinks into his easy-chair after a long, tiresome, and dangerous journey, settled back on his fragrant couch and feasted his eyes on the grizzly. He was like a boy with his first pair of skates—he could look at nothing else.

CHAPTER XXX.

OSCAR HAS A VISITOR.

WHEN Big Thompson returned from his hunt, half an hour later, carrying over his shoulder a haunch of venison wrapped in the skin of a red deer, he was astonished to find his employer hard at work gathering a supply of fuel. His bed of boughs had been removed, and its place was occupied by a roaring fire, which had been kindled close against the base of the rock.

"I did that because we haven't any blankets, and the night promises to be a cold one," said Oscar, who was himself again. "As soon as the ground and the rock are sufficiently warmed we'll take the fire away, put our beds there, and sleep as comfortably as we could in the cabin."

"Sho!" exclaimed the guide. "I have warmed my bed that way lots of times. But who larnt ye so much?"

"I got the idea from a book I read long ago."

The guide, who had often wondered at his young employer's knowledge of woodcraft, was obliged to confess that books might be of some use, after all.

They had certainly been of use to Oscar, who knew many things about a hunter's life with which the majority of sportsmen into whose company Big Thompson had been thrown were entirely unacquainted.

By the time the steaks which the hunter cut from the haunch had been broiled on the coals, Oscar had thrown together a pile of firewood large enough to last all night. The fire threw out a very bright light; and, by the aid of it, he worked at his bear until nearly twelve o'clock.

Big Thompson had in the meantime raked the fire away from the rock and placed two beds of boughs there, and when Oscar took possession of the one that had been arranged for himself he was surprised to find how warm and comfortable it was.

His sleep was sound and refreshing, in spite

of the want of blankets; and the next morning's breakfast, although it consisted of nothing but a piece of venison washed down with a cup of cold water from the brook, was eaten with a relish.

At nine o'clock the hunters started for their camp in the valley, Big Thompson leading the way with the skin and bones of Old Ephraim on his back, and Oscar following with the hide of the red deer, which was much too valuable to be left behind for the wolves.

The boy's load grew larger and heavier before they reached the cabin, for they stopped on the way to look at his traps. Some of them had been sprung without catching anything; in others the bait was missing (this proved that that thieving wolverine had been at it again); but the rest had done their full duty, and twenty dollars' worth of skins were that night added to those that were to be sold to replace the amount he had taken from the committee's money.

The third day after this was the one Big Thompson had set for his departure for the post. He and his employer were up at four

o'clock, and while one was preparing breakfast and making up a bundle of provisions for the journey, the other brightened up the fire and sat by it while he wrote a hasty letter to the secretary of the committee and to Sam Hynes, in both of which he gave a short account of the manner in which he had secured the skin of the first grizzly.

He told Sam that he intended to accompany his guide a mile or two on his journey; but instead of that he went with him to the mouth of the gorge, which was at least twelve miles from the camp.

When they reached it Big Thompson put on his snow-shoes and turned to take leave of his companion, and this time he showed considerable feeling over it. He had not yet forgotten that the boy had saved his life.

"Now, perfessor," said he, extending his hand, which Oscar took after some hesitation, "thar's one thing I see about ye that I don't seem to like fust-rate. Ye haint been trounced half enough, kase ye haint never been larnt how to mind. I told ye, t'other day, to go straight to the cabin an' stay thar; but when

I cum back I found ye camped thar under the bluff. Sich doin's as them won't go down with Big Thompson. Now I tell ye ag'in to draw a bee-line for the shanty; an' that don't mean for ye to go philanderin' off alone by yerself in the hills. 'Taint kase I'm afeard of yer bein' chawed up by some varmint, fur a boy who kin kill the fust grizzly he ever seed with one bullet is able to take keer on hisself. 'Taint that I'm afeard of, but it's somehow kinder been a-runnin' in my mind that sunthin's goin' to happen to ye; an' if ye say the word I won't budge another inch."

"Nonsense!" laughed Oscar. "I tell you to go, and may good luck attend you. If there are any letters or papers for me at the post I want them."

"*Very* good; yer the boss. But when I tell ye to keep outen them hills ye'd best do it; kase why, I've knowed better hunters than me an' you ever dare be to go off alone by theirselves an' never come back. It's mighty easy, when the snow's as deep as it is now, fur a feller to roll over into a gulch an' break his leg or twist his ankle, an' if ye done that ye'd

freeze or starve without nobody to help ye. I've knowed sich things to happen more'n onct."

"Don't worry about that," replied Oscar. "I promise you that I'll not go out of the valley while you are gone. I will do no hunting at all until I get out of meat. Now good-by. Don't waste an hour, for I shall be lonely without you. And I say, Thompson, don't forget to bring that thing, whatever it is, that you use in hunting mule-deer."

The guide turned away without making any reply. He could not trust himself to speak.

Oscar, who stood there leaning on his rifle, and watching him as he moved rapidly on his snow-shoes over the tops of the drifts, little dreamed how hard it was for the hunter to set out on his lonely tramp that morning.

He cared nothing at all for the journey, for he had often made longer and more difficult ones; but, somehow, his heart had grown very tender toward the boy of late, and he could not bear to part from him.

The guide never stopped to look back. Oscar kept his eyes fastened upon him as long

as he remained in sight, and when at last he disappeared around a bend in the gorge the young hunter shouldered his rifle and turned his face toward the brook.

"He'll certainly succeed this time," said he to himself; "and when he comes back I shall have letters from home. In the meantime I shall learn how it seems to be alone in the hills. Thompson needn't be at all afraid that I shall go out of the valley. I have no desire to meet Old Ephraim's brother, and if I should happen to fall over a cliff and hurt myself I should be in a fix indeed. I never thought of that."

The guide's traps and deadfalls, which were all set in the lower end of the valley, were better than his own, or else that wolverine never visited them, for in every one that was sprung that morning the boy found something to take home with him.

They were all carefully reset, fresh bait was supplied for those that needed it, and Oscar spent so much time at this work that he did not reach the cabin until near the middle of the afternoon.

The remaining hours of daylight were spent in replenishing the pile of wood at the door, and as soon as it began to grow dark the pony and mule were driven into their quarters for the night.

This done, Oscar shut himself in the cabin, and after eating a hearty supper went to work to remove and stretch the skins of the animals he had taken from the guide's traps.

The cabin, which had always appeared so cheerful and inviting to him, was very gloomy now, and Oscar never before felt so lonely and down-hearted.

He had a good many days of this sort of life before him, for he knew that the guide could not make the journey in less than three weeks, and it was quite possible that four might elapse before they would again take each other by the hand.

A great many things might happen in that time, Oscar told himself; and, sure enough, some things *did* happen to him that would certainly have been averted if Big Thompson had been there.

Oscar slept but little that night, and was

glad when daylight came. While he was busy he did not have time to think how lonely he was, and before he left his blanket he made the mental resolution that every one of his waking hours should be devoted to some kind of work.

This particular day he intended to spend in visiting his own traps, and he began his round as soon as he had eaten his breakfast, released the mule and pony from their shelter, and cut down a cottonwood or two for them to browse upon.

The weather having become settled again, the animals that found pasturage in the valley were once more on the move; and while Oscar was walking toward the brook he crossed the trails of several deer. They were all fresh, and when he found one that was considerably larger than the rest he was strongly tempted to follow it, but he lacked the courage.

He had grown very timid since his encounter with the grizzly, and the fear of spraining an ankle, or breaking a leg by falling over the brink of some deep gorge, made him shudder.

"If I stay in the valley, as I was told to do,

I shall be in no danger of meeting with such an accident," thought he, as he forced his way through the willows toward the brook. "The deer will gain confidence if they are not disturbed during the next three or four weeks, and when Thompson returns there will still be time enough left to—— Hello, here!"

Just at that moment Oscar came out of the willows and stopped on the bank of the brook in plain view of the spot on which he had set one of his steel traps.

He confidently expected to find something in it, but not only was he disappointed in this, but when he came to look a little closer he saw that the trap was missing.

"Aha," thought the young hunter. "That rascally wolverine has been caught napping at last. He put his foot into the trap and dragged it away with him; but of course he left a broad trail, and I shall have no difficulty in following it."

Oscar walked up the bank until he arrived opposite the spot on which the trap had been set, and there he stopped and stood motionless, looking the very picture of astonishment.

There was a trail there, but it was not such a trail as the wolverine makes. He had seen that often enough to be able to recognize it the moment he laid his eyes upon it.

The trap had been set in the bed of the stream—the water ran so rapidly that it did not freeze—but the chain that secured it led to the bank, where it was firmly fastened to a convenient root.

Knowing that the wolverine is a very strong animal, Oscar expected to find this chain broken; but instead of that he saw that it had been unfastened, and by human hands too, for right there on the edge of the bank were the prints of moccasined feet, showing where the thief had stood when he undid the chain.

He saw further that a trail made by those same feet led directly up the bank, and this suggested something to him.

Glancing quickly about among the willows to make sure that the thief was nowhere in sight. Oscar hurried down the stream as far as his trapping ground extended, following the trail all the way.

He found that it led to every one of his traps and deadfalls, and that every one of the former was missing. Some of the deadfalls were left undisturbed, for the reason, probably, that there was nothing in them; but all those that contained any game had been plundered.

Having satisfied himself on this point, Oscar retraced his steps to the spot where he first discovered the trail, and, taking it up again, followed it along the bank.

The thief had played the same game up here. He had made the entire round of Oscar's traps, and the boy counted fourteen deadfalls which he was certain had been robbed.

"If each of them had a mink in it that rascal has made twenty-eight dollars, not counting the skins he must have taken out of some of the steel traps," said Oscar, while he wished from the bottom of his heart that he was as large and strong as his guide, so that he could follow the thief and give him a good thrashing for what he had done. "If they were all fishers or martens he has made double that sum.

Now who is he, and where is he? That's the question. This trail looks like the one I saw on the day I shot my first mule-deer. The tracks are wide apart, and in one of them is the print of a patch on the bottom of the moccasin. I noticed that in the other trail. What's to be done about it? Since he has found my traps, who knows but he has found Thompson's too?"

When this thought passed through Oscar's mind, he started at his best pace down the stream to see how far the depredations of the thief extended.

He did not, however, go all the way to the guide's trapping grounds, for before he got there he saw enough to indicate that the thief had not been so far down the stream.

A short distance below the place from which Oscar's first trap had been stolen the trail branched off from the brook and led toward the outer edge of the willows, from which the cabin could be distinctly seen. The thief had passed along here for half a mile or more, making frequent halts behind rocks and trees to reconnoitre the camp, and then the trail ran

back across the brook and struck off through the open valley toward the hill on the opposite side.

After following it long enough to make sure that the thief came from those hills (remember that he had been following the back trail all this while), Oscar turned about and went back to the cabin.

Having put his rifle in its place over the door, Oscar sat down to think about it, and to make up his mind what he ought to do under the circumstances; and it was while he was thus engaged that a light step sounded outside the cabin, and the door, which he had left ajar, was pushed a little further open.

But Oscar did not know it, for he was wholly wrapped up in his meditations. The first thing that aroused him was the creaking of the wooden hinges. Then he looked up to see that a shaggy, uncombed head, covered with a greasy felt hat, had been thrust into the cabin. Under the hat was a most villainous and repulsive countenance that Oscar recognized at once.

Knowing the man and the reputation he

bore, he jumped to his feet with an exclamation of astonishment, and made a dash for his rifle; but at the same instant the door was thrown wide open, and the tall, slouching figure of Lish the Wolfer barred his way.

CHAPTER XXXI.

TOM AND HIS PARTNER.

"WELL, if this doesn't bang me completely! Who in the world would ever have dreamed of seeing that boy out here? I can't describe the feelings I experienced when he first came in sight. I knew that I was neither asleep nor dreaming, and I was really afraid that my senses were deserting me. If I haven't passed through enough since I left home to unsettle almost anybody's mind I don't want a cent. This much I know—I'll never be surprised at anything that happens hereafter."

It was Tom Preston who spoke. The last time we saw him he was hurrying into a thicket, with an axe on his shoulder, ostensibly for the purpose of cutting some wood for the fire, which he had allowed to burn itself nearly out; but his real object was to get

away from his brother, whose presence he could no longer endure.

He now stood in the edge of the thicket, listening to the echoes made by the pony's feet as Oscar rode away from the camp. As soon as the sound ceased he walked out of the bushes, threw his axe spitefully down upon the ground, and seated himself on his log again. He had never been so nearly overcome with rage before in his life.

"This is a pretty state of affairs, I must say!" he exclaimed aloud. "Here's Oscar, with a thousand dollars in clean cash at his command, a fine hunting rig of his own, a pony to ride, and living like a gentleman at the fort, with those gold-bespangled officers, who wouldn't so much as look at me if they met me on the trail, or even speak of me, unless it was to say, 'There goes some worthless vagabond.' And he even had the impudence to tell me that he has a guide, and is going to the mountains in style; while I—— It's a lucky thing for him that he left his money at the fort," said Tom, grinding his teeth in his fury. "I'd have choked some of

it out of him in short order. He must have seen at a glance how miserable I am, and yet he seemed to take delight in telling me how comfortably he is situated."

For a long time Tom sat on his log, making himself miserable with such thoughts as these, and the longer he indulged them the madder he became. He could see very plainly that there was a wide gulf between him and his brother, and it hurt him terribly to know that he had made that gulf by his own acts.

He had never dreamed that there was anything in Oscar, or "Old Sober Sides," as he used to call him; but here he was, the associate of a college faculty and the daily companion of officers who held high and honorable positions under the government.

As for himself, there was only one person in the world he could lean upon, or to whom he could look for a kind word; and he was so low down in the scale of humanity that, had he presumed to intrude among those with whom Oscar associated on terms of the closest intimacy, he would have been promptly kicked out of doors.

When Tom thought his brother had been allowed time enough to ride to the fort, and purchase the blankets and clothing he had promised to give him, he arose to his feet and walked slowly down the ravine.

"If there were any way in which I could smash up that expedition of his, and send him back to the States with as heavy a heart as I carry at this moment, I'd do it," said Tom, who was so envious of Oscar that he would gladly have injured him by every means in his power; and, this being his state of mind, he was quite eager to fall in with a plan that was suggested to him a few days afterward. "It *must* be broken up, for it would never do to allow him to go back to Eaton and Yarmouth, and earn honors and money there, while I am out here in this deplorable condition. I'll speak to Lish about it as soon as he comes back."

While Tom was ready to throw all the obstacles he could in the way of his brother's success, he was equally ready to accept from him a suit of thick clothes and a pair of blankets to keep him warm of nights. He

thought Oscar ought to be on his way back by this time, and so he was, as Tom found when he reached the mouth of the ravine.

He was coming at a gallop along the path that led through the sage-brush. Tom did not want to meet him again, so he sought a hasty concealment among the bushes on the side of the ravine opposite to that on which stood the rock he had described to his brother.

He heard Oscar pronounce his name and say that he had news for him, but he could not be coaxed out of his hiding-place. He saw the bundle that Oscar carried on the horn of his saddle, watched him as he rode up the bank toward the rock behind which the bundle was to be left, and wondered what it was that kept him there so long.

He also saw his worthy partner when he went by, and was somewhat surprised that Lish, whose eyes were as sharp as an Indian's, did not see the trail that Oscar's pony made when passing through the bushes. Oscar, too, saw the wolfer, as we know, and made all haste to quit the ravine as soon as he had passed out of hearing.

"He's gone at last," said Tom, as he drew a long breath of relief, sprang to his feet, and ran across the ravine toward the rock. "If he had stayed here much longer I should have thought that he was making the clothes or weaving the blankets for me. Oh, I see what it was that kept him," he added, snatching up the note that Oscar had thrust under the string with which the bundle was tied. "Perhaps I shall now find out what it was he wanted to tell me, and perhaps, too, he has been thoughtful enough to put a ten-dollar note into this. No, he hasn't! I might have known better than to expect it."

Tom opened the letter, but there was nothing but writing in it. He quickly made himself master of its contents; and, after cramming it into his pocket, untied the bundle, threw out the blankets, which were on the top, and began a hurried examination of all the pockets in his new suit; but he did not find what he was looking for—every one of them was empty.

"He must have hurt himself," said Tom in great disgust, as he picked up the blankets, one after the other, and shook them violently

in the air, at the same time keeping a close watch of the ground under them to see if anything fell out. "A pair of blankets, an overcoat, and a suit of clothes, but not a cent of money, although he knows that I stand in great need of it. You haven't made anything by this day's work, Mr. Oscar. Yes, you have," he added a moment later. "You have made an implacable enemy of me, and of Lish also; for I know he will be hopping mad when I read that note to him. I wish I knew what that 'affair' was, for then I could read something to Lish to make him madder. No matter. I can make up something."

Although Tom's rage was greatly increased by the sight of his brother's gift—the articles comprising it were not as fine and costly as he had expected them to be—he did not hesitate to take it. On the contrary, he made all haste to pull off his threadbare garments and get inside the new and warmer ones.

He did not abandon his old clothes, but wrapped them up in his blankets, threw them over his shoulder, and started toward the bottom of the ravine.

Just as he reached it his steps were arrested by an exclamation of astonishment that fell upon his ear, and, looking up, he saw Lish the Wolfer peeping out from behind a rock a little distance away.

"Hello! What brought you back here?" exclaimed Tom. "I thought I saw you ride toward the camp a quarter of an hour ago."

"Mebbe ye did," replied the wolfer, still keeping his position behind the rock, and showing nothing but his head around the side of it. "Thar's been a hoss through this gulch since I went away. But, see here, pard. Ye don't look like yerself."

"Don't I?" replied Tom, who now walked up and presented himself before the wolfer. "Well, you can see that it is I, can't you? Come on. I've a story to tell and a letter to read to you; and if you don't get mad and vow vengeance against the one who wrote it, you are not the man I take you for. Lish, you had an awful row with some fellow last summer, and injured him seriously, and if you don't dig out of here in a little less than no time you'll be arrested."

"'Taint no sich thing!" exclaimed Lish, stopping suddenly, and facing his companion.

Tom saw at once that he had made a mistake. If he had been a little better acquainted with his partner he never would have accused him of being in a fight with anybody, for he lacked the courage to carry him through such an ordeal.

"Well, you are suspected of it, anyway," said Tom; "and if you stay here and allow yourself to be taken into custody our trip to the hills is up stump. But you did steal something," he added, closely watching his companion's face, on which a change at once became visible, "and I know it."

That he had hit the nail on the head this time was evident. Lish turned all sorts of colors, and looked up and down the ravine, and before and behind him, as if he were trying to make up his mind which way he would run, in case circumstances rendered it necessary for him to seek safety in flight.

Finally he backed into the bushes, and said, almost in a whisper:

"Who told ye that story, pard?"

"I will begin at the beginning and tell you all about it," was Tom's reply. "You met a boy on horseback up there in the sage-brush, didn't you? Well, that fellow was my brother, whom I supposed to be a long way from—— Don't interrupt me now," he exclaimed, when he saw his companion's eyes growing larger and his mouth open as if he were about to speak. "Let me tell my story in my own way, and then I will answer all the questions you can ask. That was my brother, as I told you, and he is——"

Here Tom went on to tell, in language the wolfer could easily comprehend, all about the unexpected meeting between himself and Oscar, and to repeat, as nearly as he could, the conversation that passed between them.

He described how his brother happened to be there, told what he intended to do, how much money he had, and wound up with the remark that he was soon to start for the hills, with Big Thompson for a companion.

Then he exhibited the new clothes and blankets that Oscar had purchased for him, and finally he came to the note, which he read

to suit himself, not forgetting to put in something about the theft Lish had committed, and going into the particulars of that terrible fight he was suspected of being engaged in during the previous summer.

It may have been all imagination on Tom's part, but he really thought that his companion seemed to grow taller and swell out considerably when he read that imaginary part of the letter that related to the fight. He certainly did grow bigger in feeling, if not in person, for he had never before been suspected of "severely injuring" anybody, and he regarded it as a high honor. He forgot the strange story to which he had listened, and became lost in admiration of himself.

"Mebbe thar's sunthin' in that thar account, arter all," said he, looking reflectively at the ground. "I've had so many of them triflin' skrimmages, an' tumbled over so many fellers that I don't seem to rightly know which one that thar letter tells on. Don't amount to nothin' when ye gits used to 'em."

As the wolfer said this he drew himself up to his full height and looked formidable indeed.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE WOLFER'S PLAN.

"IF folks don't want to git hurt they mustn't come within reach of this yere," continued Lish, tapping the handle of the knife he wore in his belt.

"I suppose not," said Tom, who could not help feeling the most profound contempt for his lying partner. "Now what did you steal?"

"Wal, that *thar* aint by no means so trifflin'," replied Lish, once more lowering his voice and glancing suspiciously about him. "I reckon mebbe we'd best move on an' change our camp afore one of them sergeants comes down here with a squad. I seed a young leftenant down thar to the settlement, an' I kinder thought he was arter me by the way he looked; but I had disremembered all about

stealin' that thar muel from Ike Barker last summer. The kurn knows it, I reckon."

"Of course he does!" replied Tom promptly.

"Who told him?"

"My brother did. He's just that sort."

"What's he got ag'in me, do you reckon?" asked Lish, who seemed to be all in the dark.

"Nothing at all. He wants to injure me, and the only way he can do it is by breaking up our expedition. He knows that I am going to make money this winter, and he doesn't like it. He wants to keep me away from the hills, and that is the reason he is trying to have you arrested."

"I wish I could bring the sights on my rifle an' the tip eend of his nose in range for jest half a minute," said the wolfer in savage tones, as he came out of the bushes and led the way down the ravine. "I'd make him think creation was comin', sure!"

"I don't want you to shoot at him," said Tom, who need not have had any fear on this score. "I only want you to help me serve him as he is trying to serve me. He is getting on in the world altogether too fast."

"Wharabouts in the hills is him an' Big Thompson goin'?"

"I don't know. He didn't tell me."

"We must watch 'em an' find out. If we see that they are strikin' for our grounds we must shoot their critters an' stop 'em. Thar aint room enough in our valley fur me an' Big Thompson."

"You don't like that man, do you? What has he done to you?"

The two worthies had by this time reached the place where Lish had left his horse. The latter did not answer Tom's question, but threw one of his long legs over the pony's back, and rode toward the camp, leaving his partner to follow on foot.

He did not even offer to carry Tom's bundle, for he was too lazy to make any unnecessary exertion.

While on the way down the ravine Tom made repeated efforts to find out why it was that Lish hated Oscar's guide so cordially, but the answers he received did not let him into the secret of the matter.

All he could learn was that Big Thompson

had interfered too much with the wolfer's business, and that the latter owed the guide a grudge for it.

He had never been able to have a settlement with him, but he would have it the very first time they met.

The facts of the case were that Big Thompson, in his capacity of government scout, had several times caused the wolfer to be arrested on the charge of selling arms and ammunition to hostile Indians.

While there was not the least doubt of his guilt, there was no evidence on which he could be convicted, and he had always been released, after a short confinement in the guard-house.

This, of course, made Lish very angry, and on one occasion he had tried to make matters easier for himself, and deprive the government of a faithful servant at the same time, by sending a ball after Big Thompson; but the long chase that followed, and the noise of the bullets which his determined pursuer sent whistling about his ears, satisfied him that the scout was a good man to be let alone.

He never repeated the experiment, but took

the best of care to keep out of Big Thompson's sight. The latter had not forgotten this little incident, and that was the reason he threatened to pull the wolfer's hair when he met him.

As soon as Tom and his companion reached their camp, they packed up the little luggage they possessed, and struck deeper into the woods.

Two hours afterward they were snugly settled in a thicket on the side of a bluff, from which they could see the bottom of the ravine for the distance of half a mile, and thus detect the presence of anyone who might approach the bluff before they could be seen themselves.

In this camp they passed only their nights, their waking hours being given to watching the fort from the top of the hill on which the sage-brush grew. They were waiting to see what Oscar and his guide were going to do. This was a matter of no little importance to the wolfer.

Whenever Tom grew down-hearted and discouraged Lish had always tried to cheer him up by describing to him a beautiful valley among the hills, in which not only wolves, but

game animals of all kinds were so abundant that one soon grew tired of shooting and trapping them.

It was true that there was a valley something like this a few days' journey distant, and it was also true that Oscar's guide knew as much about it as Lish did, and that he quite as fully appreciated the hunting and trapping to be found there.

He had led a party of sportsmen to that very place a summer or two ago, and his presence there had caused the wolfer to pack up his skins and leave with the utmost precipitation.

Lish wanted to go to that same valley this winter, and if events proved that Big Thompson was going there too, he must be stopped at all hazards. It was too fine a hunting ground to be given up to anybody.

These days of waiting were very tedious to Tom, who soon grew tired of lying around in the brush, watching for somebody who never showed himself. All this while Oscar was enjoying the best of sport, in company with a select party, coursing antelope and shooting wolves with the bow and arrow; but Tom and

his companion did not see him when he left the fort or when he came back to it, for the reason that on both occasions they were soundly asleep in their camp on the bluff.

Monday morning dawned at last, and they had scarcely taken up their usual stations when a horseman rode out of the fort, followed by a covered wagon, drawn by a large mouse-colored mule.

Tom saw them, but he would have paid no very particular attention to them had it not been for the actions of the wolfer, who, after uttering an exclamation indicative of the greatest amazement, rubbed his hands together and chuckled to himself.

"It's them," said he; "the very fellers we've been a-waitin' fur so long. That one on the pony is Big Thompson, an' I reckon t'other one is yer brother, aint it?"

"I can't tell yet. He's too far away," replied Tom. "You seem to be glad that we are about to make a start."

"Yes, I be; but that aint what makes me feel so peart. That thar muel an' wagon is the very ones I borrered from Ike Barker last

summer. I sold 'em down in Denver; an' if the feller I sold 'em to haint brung 'em up here an' sold 'em to yer brother, I'm a Dutchman! Now, if they're goin' to our grounds, they'll foller the trail, an' that'll take 'em right past Ike Barker's ranch. If they'll only go thar we'll bust 'em up higher'n the moon!"

"How will we do it?" asked Tom.

"I'll tell ye when the time comes. Stay here an' keep your eyes on to 'em, while I go back to camp arter our plunder."

As there was no very hard work about this, Tom readily consented to do as his companion desired. He lay concealed in the edge of the brush, watching the wagon, and as it drew nearer to him he saw that the driver of it was his brother. He recognized him by the clothes he wore. He shook his fist at him as he passed along the base of the hill.

When the wolfer came back an hour later, leading his pony, which was loaded with their camp equipage and provisions, Tom met him at the mouth of the ravine.

He told him which way the wagon had gone,

and Lish declared that it was all right. He thought he knew where Big Thompson was going, but they would watch him a day or two, he said, until they were sure of his course, and then they would get ahead of him and carry out the plan he had determined upon.

We have already told what the plan was, and therefore it is needless to dwell upon it. The note Ike Barker found fastened to his door was written by Tom at his partner's dictation, and as Lish could not have been induced to undertake so dangerous a mission himself, Tom volunteered to put it where the ranchman could find it.

This he did without being discovered, but he breathed a great deal easier when he came back from the dug-out and joined his companion, who was waiting for him behind a swell a little distance away.

"There was a blanket hanging in the doorway, and I fastened the note to it with a pin I happened to have in my coat," said Tom, with a sigh of satisfaction. "I guess they have gone about as far toward the hills as they will get this fall—don't you?"

"I'm sartin of it," answered the wolfer, who seemed to be as highly elated as Tom was. "Ike'll know his critter as soon as he puts his peepers on to him, and he'll have him back spite of Big Thompson or anybody else. He's that kind of a feller."

If Tom had really succeeded in stopping his brother's progress it would have been a most unfortunate thing for himself. But Oscar was helped out of the difficulty by the kindness of the ranchman, and thus it happened that he was in a condition to give assistance to Tom at a time when he stood in the greatest need of it.

After this piece of strategy the wolfers journeyed more rapidly toward the hills. Having no wagon to impede their movements, they were able to take a straight course for the valley of which Lish had so often spoken, and in this way they gained nearly three days on Oscar and his guide, who were obliged to keep to the "divides."

With his usual caution, the wolfer proceeded to hide himself as soon as he reached his hunting grounds.

He went the whole length of the valley, and when at last he was ready to make his winter's camp, he selected a spot that was almost hemmed in by high and perpendicular bluffs, and which could be approached only from one direction.

Long before they were settled in this camp (their only shelter was a hastily constructed "lean-to," through whose roof the snow found its way to the ground almost as readily as it did anywhere in the woods) Tom had become heartily disgusted with his partner and tired of his company.

He turned out to be a regular tyrant; and when things went wrong—and they never seemed to go any other way—he abused Tom without stint.

He could do this with impunity now, for Tom could not desert him with any hope of finding his way back to civilization; nor could he resist his partner's tyranny without bringing upon himself certain and speedy punishment. There was a wicked gleam in the wolfer's eye sometimes that fairly made Tom tremble.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

LISH DECIDES TO MOVE.

THE wolfer had brought Tom to the hills with him for a purpose. He intended to make him do all the drudgery of the camp, and to increase his own profits in the spring by stealing the skins the boy might find time to capture.

But Tom was not long in discovering that his catch was not likely to be very large. He was expected to cook all the meals and cut all the wood for the fire.

As their larder was not very well supplied, the cooking did not amount to much, but the chopping did.

Being more accustomed to handling a pen than he was to swinging an axe, he made very slow progress with this part of his work, and by the time it was done there were but a few hours of daylight left.

Still he did manage to take a few pelts, and

it seemed to him that he ought to have taken more, for some of his baits were always missing, and on following up the trail that led from them, he not unfrequently found the carcasses of the wolves that had eaten the baits—minus the skins.

Lish was systematically robbing him. Knowing where the boy put out his baits, he visited them early every morning, taking as many skins as he thought he could without exciting his companion's suspicion, and then going off to hunt up his own.

"He'll never know the difference," Lish often said to himself, "an' I don't reckon it makes any odds to me if he does, fur if he opens his yawp I'll wear a hickory out over his back. The spelter'll all be mine some day, anyhow. I aint a-goin' to show him the way to this nice wolf ground an' give him grub an' pizen fur nothin', I bet you!"

"This is some more of my honest partner's work," Tom would say when he found the body of a wolf from which the skin had been removed. "It beats the world what miserable luck I do have! I can't make a cent, either

honestly or dishonestly. Oscar knew what he was talking about when he said that Lish intended to rob me. Why didn't I go up to the fort to see him, as he wanted me to do, instead of making myself unhappy over his good luck? If he were only here now how quickly I'd bundle up my share of the skins and find my way to his camp!"

We have said that things always went wrong with Lish, but that is not in strict accordance with the facts.

There was one hour in every twenty-four during which he allowed his good nature to triumph over the tyrant in his disposition, and that always happened at night, provided his own catch had been tolerably fair, and he had been able to steal a few skins from Tom without being caught in the act.

On these occasions Lish entered into friendly conversation with his partner over his pipe, during which he never failed to make a good many inquiries concerning Oscar and his business, and he seemed particularly desirous of finding out just how the young taxidermist looked and acted.

This led Tom to believe that Lish was greatly interested in his brother and his movements, and so he was; for he had not yet been able to settle down into the belief that his plan for keeping Oscar out of the hills would prove successful.

Through the influence of Big Thompson a compromise of some kind might be effected between Oscar and the ranchman, or the boy might purchase the stolen mule and wagon.

In either case he and his guide would be able to continue their journey with but little delay, and come into the valley in spite of the wolfer's efforts to keep them away from it.

This was what Lish was afraid of, and it was one cause of his constant ill-humor.

When the snow fell and blocked the gorge he would feel safe, and not before. The wolfer knew Big Thompson, but Oscar he did not know,—he did not have time to take a very good look at him when he met him in the sage-brush,—and he wanted to learn all about him, so that he would be sure to recognize him if he chanced to encounter him in the valley. He

had another idea in his head too; and what it was shall be told further on.

The wished-for storm came at last, and Tom was disposed to grumble sullenly when he awoke the next morning and found three inches of snow on his blanket; but Lish was as gay as a lark, and excited the suspicions of his companion by offering to help him prepare the breakfast.

All the wolfer's fears were banished now. If Big Thompson was not in the valley already, he would not be likely to get there at all, for the gale must have filled the gorge full of snow. But Lish wanted to satisfy himself entirely on this point; so he left the camp as soon as he had eaten his bacon and cracker, and, after stealing a few skins from Tom, set out to visit the lower end of the valley.

On his way there, he struck the trail of two mule-deer, and this caused him to postpone his reconnoissance for the present. He was getting tired of bacon, and believing that a fresh steak for dinner would be more palatable, he took up the trail at once, and followed it at the top of his speed.

About two miles further on the trail left the valley and turned toward the hills. When Lish saw this he deposited his wolf-skins in the fork of a small tree, and having thus put himself in light running order, he went ahead faster than ever.

By the time he had run himself almost out of breath he had the satisfaction of discovering, by signs which an experienced hunter can readily detect, that he was closing in upon the game.

He had already begun to look around for it, when he was startled almost out of his moccasins by the report of a rifle, which sounded close at hand, followed by a tremendous crashing in the bushes, as a fine doe broke cover and dashed down a hill a short distance away.

Lish could easily have shot her, as she passed without seeing him ; but he never thought of it. His whole mind was concentrated on something else. Who fired that gun ? Being determined to find out, the wolfer ran to the edge of the bluff and looked over.

"That thar letter that Tom writ an' put on to Ike Barker's door didn't stop 'em, arter

all," said Lish to himself, as he stretched his long neck out to its full length, and took a good survey of the hunter below him. "Here's one of them pizen critters now. He's gone an' killed my black-tail, an' now he's a-yellin' for Big Thompson. So ye're the chap as wanted to have me put into the guard-house ag'in, be ye? Fur two cents I'd——"

The wolfer finished the sentence by drawing his rifle to his shoulder, as if he were about to shoot.

After taking a good aim at Oscar's head he lowered the weapon and looked nervously about him, at the same time listening for Big Thompson's reply. He wanted to see which way it came from, so that he could secure his own safety by running off in another direction.

But there was no answer to Oscar's repeated calls, and the wolfer finally mustered up courage enough to start for camp, not forgetting to stop on the way and take down the bundle of skins he had left in the tree.

Hearing nothing of his dreaded enemy, his fears left him after a while, and he was able to

think the matter over and make up his mind what he would do about it. One thing was certain—he dared not remain longer in that valley, for there was no knowing at what moment he and Big Thompson might run against each other in the woods. In order to avoid that it was necessary to break camp at once and start for new hunting grounds.

"I won't tell Tom who them fellers is," thought the wolfer as he neared his camp, "for if I do he'll run off and jine 'em. Now whar is he, do ye reckon? He's allers off when he's wanted to hum."

Tom, having completed his morning's drudgery, had gone out to visit the baits he had scattered around the day before, and he did not come in until it was almost dark.

Lish waited and watched for him with no little impatience, constantly harassed by the fear that Tom would somehow discover that his brother was in the valley, in which case he knew that he would be obliged to pass the rest of the winter alone, doing all his own work about the camp, and catching all his own skins. Tom was too valuable an assistant to

be given up, and the wolfer resolved to hold fast to him as long as he could.

Tom came in at last, staggering under the weight of his day's catch, and was instantly put on his guard by the friendly greeting his partner extended to him.

The wolfer's cordiality, however, was all assumed for the occasion. If Lish had acted out his feelings he would have abused Tom soundly for being so long absent from camp, and, in his rage, he might have done something even worse; but knowing that it would not be safe to say or do too much just then, he bottled up his wrath, to be held in reserve until some future occasion, and said cheerfully:

"Pard, ye've done fine; ye have so. An' yer the green young feller that wanted me to show ye how to pizen wolves! Ye know more about the business now nor I do, an' I've follered it a good many years. Now I reckon ye must be a trifle tired arter packin' all them skins so fur, an' if ye'll cook the supper I'll chop the wood."

"What's up, I wonder?" thought Tom, as he threw his hides down in one corner of the

lean-to. "He don't speak that way to me unless he wants me to do something for him. Well," he added aloud, "where is it?"

"Whar's what?" asked Lish.

"The deer, or whatever it was, that you shot. I heard the report of your gun."

"So ye did; but I didn't get him. I missed him."

Lish put a stop to the conversation by grabbing the axe and going at the pile of fuel in front of the cabin as if he meant to do something; but when he had cut a few sticks of half-decayed wood he was tired enough to stop and rest.

"Say, pard," he exclaimed, "I've been a prospectin' to-day! The varmints aint by no means as plenty about yere as they had ought to be, but I know whar thar's piles of 'em in a leetle valley 'bout ten miles deeper into the hills. We want to go whar the wolves is, ye know; so to-morrow mornin' we'll pack up bright an' arly an' dig out."

"Oh, that's what you want, is it?" thought Tom. "Well, I don't care where we go. I've got to endure your detestable company all

winter, I suppose, and I might as well be in one place as another. I shall not see a happy day anywhere."

"What do ye say, pard?" exclaimed Lish.

"I say all right," was the indifferent reply.

That this was all the wolfer wanted was evident from his actions. He threw down the axe, declaring that he was awful tired after his long tramp, and picking out the warmest place beside the fire, he took possession of it, leaving Tom to cook the supper and cut the wood besides.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A CLIMAX.

AT daylight the next morning breakfast had been eaten, and the two wolfers were on their way to their new hunting grounds, Lish leading his pony, which was loaded with their outfit and the skins they had secured, and Tom bringing up the rear.

If the latter had been as skilled in woodcraft as his brother was he would not have been long in finding out that Lish had told him a falsehood regarding his movements of the previous day.

There were no signs of a trail in the gorge which they followed from one valley to the other, and that proved conclusively that the wolfer had not been along there during the last twenty-four hours.

But Tom took no note of the fact. He was utterly indifferent to everything around him,

and it is hard to tell how he would have lived if he had not been cheered and sustained by the hope—which sometimes amounted to positive conviction—that there were brighter days in store for him, and that his affairs would soon take a turn for the better.

He was in a very repentant frame of mind, and promised himself over and over again that, if he ever got back among civilized people, he would lead an honest and respectable life, in spite of all the temptations that could be thrown around him.

His first hard work should be to return every cent of Mr. Smith's money, and when that was done he would once more be able to look honest men in the face.

The valley, which they reached at noon that day, was by no means as fine a hunting ground as Tom had expected to find it. It was not so well watered or so effectually protected from the storms as the one in which they had first taken up their abode, and consequently the deer, and the wolves that preyed upon them, were not found in any great numbers.

Their want of success of course had its effect

upon the temper of his partner, and for three long weeks he never spoke a civil word to Tom, who lived in constant apprehension of open violence.

Lish grumbled every time the firewood gave out before morning, and swore whenever he looked at the very small supply of bacon and cracker they had left.

Finding that he grew worse every day, Tom, who feared an outbreak above all the other evils that threatened him, gradually gave up wolfing and devoted himself to his camp duties; but not even the sight of the nice fat grouse that were set before him every night, and which Tom had snared in the neighboring woods, could put Lish in good humor.

From this time forward Tom provided all the fresh meat that was served up in that camp, for Lish would not expend his ammunition on anything smaller than a deer, and that was an animal he did not often see.

When Tom stopped putting out bait for the wolves he gave the wolfer another cause for displeasure, and the man took his own way to show how mad he was over it.

One afternoon, when Tom came in from making the round of his snares, he was surprised to see that the skins they had captured, which were piled in one corner of the lean-to after being cured, had disappeared.

Believing that the camp had been robbed during his absence, and that he would be sure to suffer for it when his partner returned at night, Tom threw down the grouse he had captured and made the circuit of the lean-to, looking for the robber's trail.

He found it after a short search, and the moment he saw it he knew that it had been made by Lish himself. He followed it up for a few hundred yards, taking care to step exactly in the wolfer's tracks, and presently came within sight of a tree, which had been partly uprooted by the wind.

Among the branches, about twenty feet from the ground, was a small platform, built of poles, and on this platform was something covered with a blanket.

To scramble up the inclined trunk, raise the blanket, and see what was under it was scarcely two minutes' work. The blanket was

one of his own, and the objects it concealed and protected from the weather were the skins he and Lish had captured.

At the sight of them Tom uttered a low whistle; and, after looking all around to make sure that his partner was nowhere in sight, he backed down the trunk and set out for camp at a rapid walk, being careful, as before, to step squarely into the wolfer's tracks.

Arriving at the lean-to, he replenished the fire; and, picking up one of the grouse, began plucking it, working as fast as he could in order to make up for lost time.

He knew that Lish would be sure to take him to task for something the moment he returned, and if he did not find a cup of hot coffee waiting for him, supplemented by as good a supper as Tom's limited means would allow him to prepare, something disagreeable might happen.

"What object could Lish have had in view when he stole those skins out of the camp and hid them in that tree?" Tom asked himself over and over again. "I can't think of any unless he intends to clear out and leave me to

shift for myself. If he should do that, what in the world would become of me?"

While Tom was turning this alarming thought over in his mind he heard somebody coming toward the camp at a rapid pace, stamping furiously through the crust as if to give emphasis to some words he was muttering to himself, but which Tom could not catch.

The next moment the wolfer came round the side of the lean-to. In one hand he carried his rifle and in the other a stout switch, which he was brandishing wildly over his head. His face was fairly black with fury.

"Look a-yere!" he yelled, as he leaned his rifle up in one corner and approached the place where Tom was sitting. "What ye bin a-snoopin' round out thar in the timber fur to-day? Don't be long in speakin' up, kase this hickory is gettin' heavy, an' it will have to drop somewhar purty soon!"

Tom was surprised, and greatly alarmed besides. He was alarmed by the expression of almost ungovernable fury he saw in the

wolfer's face, and surprised to learn that his movements had been so readily detected, after all the pains he had taken to cover his trail.

But there was nothing surprising in that, for if he had carefully examined his trail he would have seen that there were the prints of two boot heels in each one of the tracks that had been made by the wolfer's moccasined feet.

"What ye bin a-pokin' yer nose into my business fur?" shouted Lish, making the switch whistle as he whirled it around his head. "What made you go out an' hunt up them skins?"

"What made you hide them?" asked Tom, as soon as he could speak. "It looks as though you were trying to rob me of my share. Some of those skins belong to me."

"I hid 'em kase I aint a-goin' to have ye slip inter the camp when I aint here, an' go off to find yer brother."

"If my brother was anywhere within reach of me it would take a better man than you to keep me here," was the thought that passed through Tom's mind.

But he knew better than to give utterance to it.

"Thar don't none of them pelts b'long to ye, an' I don't want ye to fergit it, nuther!" exclaimed Lish. "Ye haven't pizened a dozen varmints since we come to this yere place."

"That's because I can't do all the work about camp and put out baits too," replied Tom. "If you will cut the wood I'll do the cooking and catch as many skins as you do into the bargain."

"Yer so powerful lazy yer don't 'arn yer salt," said the wolfer, paying no attention to this proposition. "Now Ill jest tell ye what's a fact. If ye don't mind yer own business an' let mine be I'll lay that hickory over yer head till ye see more'n a hundred stars. Ye hear me? I'll put it here in this corner, so's to have it handy. Ye've been a-spilin' for a trouncin', an' I'm jest the feller to give it to ye."

Tom drew a long breath of relief, but made no reply.

He had been expecting something like this for a long time, and he was glad to know that

his punishment was to be postponed for a few hours at least.

He did not go near the skins again (if he had he would not have found them in the tree, for they had been removed to other and safer quarters), but gave all his time to his camp duties and to keeping Lish supplied with fresh meat, which the latter was sure to call for every night and morning.

Tom's object was to put off the day of his "trouncin'" as long as he possibly could.

One afternoon, about two weeks after the occurrence of the events we have just described, Tom had the misfortune to cut his foot while he was chopping wood.

The wound would have been considered a serious one under any circumstances, but situated as he was it became positively dangerous.

Lacking the forethought as well as the means to provide for such accidents as this, he had brought no bandages or liniment with him, and all he could do was to pull off his boot, apply some ice-cold water—which was about the worst thing he could have put on

it—wrap the injured member up in one of his extra shirts, and crawl to his bed under the lean-to.

Lish swore loudly when he came in. He fairly surpassed all his previous efforts in this line; and one, to have heard the abuse he heaped upon the head of his unfortunate partner, would have supposed that Tom had been guilty of some great crime.

The wolfer now had to cook for himself and cut his own wood. A short experience must have disgusted him with this sort of work; for, on the third morning after the accident, Tom awoke from a troubled slumber to find his last blanket and his partner missing. If it had not been for the fact that the pony was standing near the dying embers of the fire, he would have believed that Lish had deserted him in his trouble.

The wolfer was gone two whole days and a part of another, and when at last he came within sight of the camp he was followed by a very small pony, which fairly staggered under the weight of a huge pack he bore upon his back.

Where he had been, and what he had been doing, of course Tom did not know; but he could see by the expression on his face that Lish was highly elated over something. He really looked good-natured.

"Hello, pard!" he exclaimed as he came to a halt in front of the lean-to. "How ye makin' it by this time? If we aint struck it rich now we never will! That thar pony is jest loaded down with jest the finest lot of——"

Lish stopped and looked about him, evidently not at all pleased with the gloomy appearance of things. A few green boughs sputtered on the fire, giving out a dense smoke, but no flame; Tom was flat on his back, just as he had left him, and there was no dinner waiting for him.

"Why didn't ye get me nothin' to eat?" demanded Lish.

"Why didn't you send a messenger on ahead to tell me that you were coming?" replied Tom, driven almost desperate by the pain of his wound, which was growing worse, in spite of the best care he could give it.

"Wal, ye see me here now, don't ye?" retorted Lish. "Git up from thar an' make me a cup of coffee."

"I can't; the coffee is all gone."

"Then give me a partridge an' some bread!" commanded the wolfer, beginning to grow angry.

"I can't do that either. I haven't been able to visit my snares since you went away, and there is not a crumb of cracker left."

"Thar aint?" shouted Lish, while an ominous light shone in his eyes. "An' ye aint done nothin' but lay thar an' stuff yerself till our coffee an' grub's all gone! Git up from thar, I tell ye, an' go out an' ketch me a partridge!"

"I can't," replied Tom, who, seeing that an outbreak was not very far distant, began to be terribly alarmed. "I can't walk a step. You have no idea how I suffer all the time."

"'Taint nothin' on 'arth but laziness that is the matter of ye!" said Lish as he laid down his rifle and picked up the switch. "If ye won't move, I'll have to move ye. Git up

from thar! Git up, ye lazy wagabone, an' git me sunthin' to eat! Do ye reckon yer goin' to git up?"

These words were accompanied by a shower of blows, which fell upon Tom's head and shoulders with such force that the sound of them could be, indeed *was*, heard a considerable distance away.

If his life had depended upon it, poor Tom could not have maintained an upright position for half a minute. He had tried it often enough to know. Whenever he attempted it the blood rushed into his foot, causing him the most intense anguish.

He could only lie there and make feeble, but unavailing, efforts to shield his face, which seemed to be the mark at which his tormentor aimed his blows. His shrieks of agony fell upon deaf ears, the wolfer having determined to beat him until he got upon his feet.

They were both so completely engrossed—Lish in raining his blows upon his helpless victim, and Tom in trying to ward them off—and the hubbub they occasioned was so great, that they did not hear the sonorous bray which

awoke the echoes of the hills, nor the noise made by rapidly advancing hoofs.

Just as Tom was about to give up in despair, and allow the wolfer to beat him to death —if he had made up his mind to do so—a large mouse-colored mule, without saddle or bridle, but carrying a rider on his back, suddenly appeared upon the scene.

The mule was coming at a furious pace directly toward the lean-to, and for a moment it looked as though he was going to run right through it; but he stopped when he reached the side of the pony, and his rider swung himself to the ground.

No sooner was he fairly landed on his feet than he dashed forward with an angry exclamation, and planted his fist so squarely and forcibly against the wolfer's neck that he doubled him up like a piece of wet cloth, and brought the fracas to a close in an instant.

CHAPTER XXXV.

WHAT OSCAR'S VISITOR DID.

LISH the Wolfer had not passed many days in his new camp before he began to see very plainly that he had not bettered his prospects by coming there. For reasons we have already given, game was not as abundant as it was in that other hunting ground, and something must be done about it, or the furs he would carry back to the settlements in the spring would not sell for any great sum.

There was only one thing he could do, and that was to carry out a plan that had long ago suggested itself to him.

Lish knew that a man of Big Thompson's active habits would not be content to pass more than half his time in camp doing nothing, but that he would devote all his spare hours to trapping. He was as successful in this line as he was in causing the arrest of

those who violated the law by selling arms and ammunition to hostile Indians, and if Lish could only find out where his traps were set, and visit them occasionally while the lawful owner was absent, he might make something handsome by it.

The only objection to this plan was that there was a spice of danger in it; but this Lish hoped to avoid by the celerity and secrecy of his movements.

Having pondered the matter for almost a month, the wolfer set out for the valley from which he had so hastily retreated, intending to give it a good looking over, and to be governed in his future movements by what he saw there.

He took Tom's last blanket from his shoulders while the latter was asleep, and left him without a stick of wood with which to replenish the fire when he awoke.

He went into camp that night on the side of the valley directly opposite to the thicket in which Oscar's cabin stood; and, at an early hour the next morning, he had that cabin under surveillance. He saw Big Thompson

and his young companion when they started for the gorge—this was the morning on which the guide began his second journey to the fort—and, as soon as they were out of sight, he ran across the valley from the willows and plunged into the woods behind the cabin.

The impulse to look into it, and see if there was anything there worth stealing, was very strong; but the fear that Big Thompson might come back and find him there was stronger, and he did not yield to that impulse.

He followed about half a mile in the rear of the two hunters, keeping them always in sight; and, when he saw them shake hands and separate at the mouth of the gorge, one going on toward the prairie, while the other—after loitering about for a while—came back into the valley, his delight knew no bounds.

He knew as well as Oscar did that Big Thompson was about to make an effort to reach the fort; and his first care must be to watch him, and see if he succeeded in getting through the gorge. If he did, so much the better for himself, for he would have a clear field for his operations.

Leaving Oscar to go where he pleased, until it suited his convenience to look after him, the wolfer ran along in the edge of the woods until he reached the gorge. A high hill arose on one side of it, and this the wolfer scaled, after considerable trouble, and sat down on the top of it to watch Big Thompson's progress.

From his lofty perch he kept the guide in sight for more than an hour; and the ease with which the latter passed over the drifts would have satisfied a less crafty and suspicious person that there was no danger to be apprehended from his unexpected return.

But Lish was so very much afraid of Big Thompson that he dared not take any risks. He kept his position on the top of the hill until it was almost dark, and then scrambled down and ran back to his camp.

"I s'pose I might have turned that thar chap outen that thar cabin, an' slept for onct with a tight roof over my head an' plenty of blankets to keep me warm," muttered the wolfer, as he searched about in the timber for some dry wood with which to start his fire. "But if Big Thompson *should* 'a' happened to come

back in the night—whooppee! Howsomever, who keers? I'll go thar bright an' arly in the mornin', and take everything I kin lay my hands on to. I'll larn that young chap that he's barkin' up the wrong tree when he tries to shet me into the guard-house!"

By the time daylight came, however, the wolfer had made a slight change in his programme. Before visiting the cabin, he thought it would be a good plan to hunt up Big Thompson's traps, and thus make sure of something to repay him for his long journey. After that he would take a look at the camp, and, if the coast was clear, make a descent upon it; but, if he found that the guide had returned during the night, he would pick up the game he had stolen from the traps and make all haste to get back into his own valley.

This programme was duly carried out, and the result exceeded the wolfer's most sanguine expectations. Both sides of the brook were lined with traps, and Lish robbed and stole so many that, by the time he found the last one, his load was as heavy as he could conveniently manage.

His first work was to lighten it, which he did by removing the skins of the stolen animals, which, with the traps, he placed among the evergreens, out of sight.

He was very proud of his morning's work, and his success gave him courage.

The wolfer now crossed to the nearest bluffs; and, running along under cover of the timber, finally took up a position from which he could command a view of the cabin door.

He saw Oscar when he came out and went toward the brook to make the round of his traps, but he did not dare go any nearer the cabin. The fear that Big Thompson might be in there held him back.

It was three hours before the young taxidermist returned; and, when he came in sight, there was something in his attitude and movements which told Lish that the boy had discovered his loss.

As soon as Oscar disappeared through the door, the wolfer arose to his feet and came out of his hiding place. This was the time, if ever, to ascertain whether or not Big Thompson was at home.

He ran toward the cabin with noiseless footsteps; and, placing his ear close to one of the cracks between the logs, listened intently.

No sound came from the inside, and this emboldened him to move around to the door and listen there. Still he heard nothing, and this gave him courage to thrust his head into the cabin.

There sat Oscar, gazing fixedly into the fire, and he was alone. The hinges creaked dolefully as the wolfer laid his hand upon the door, and this aroused Oscar, who jumped to his feet and ran forward as if he meant to shut the intruder out; but, if that was his object, Lish defeated it by throwing the door wide open and stepping across the threshold.

"Hold on thar!" he exclaimed in tones which he intended should strike terror to the boy's heart and drive away all thoughts of escape or resistance. "If ye come an inch nigher I'll send ye to kingdom come quicker'n ye could bat yer eye!"

Oscar stopped and stood motionless, for it would have been folly to do anything else. The wolfer held his rifle at a "ready," the

hammer was raised and his finger was on the trigger.

"So yer the chap as wanted to put me into the guard-house, be ye?" exclaimed Lish, after he had given his prisoner a good looking over.

"I?" cried Oscar. "I guess not!"

"Wal, I guess ye be," said Lish, taking something from his pocket and throwing it at Oscar—he was afraid to hand it to him for fear that the boy would seize his gun. He was so big a coward that he dared not meet a youth of sixteen on anything like equal terms. "Read that, an' see if ye aint."

It was a piece of paper; and, when Oscar picked it up and opened it, he saw that it was the note he had written to his brother on the day he left that bundle of clothing behind the rock.

But there were some words in the note that did not belong there—some that related to a fight and a theft, and an attempt that was to be made to arrest the wolfer. Tom had put them there to refresh his memory, and to enable him to read the note twice alike.

Oscar saw through it all, and wondered how his brother could be guilty of such an act of meanness, to call it by no harder name.

"What do ye say now?" demanded the wolfer, as Oscar tossed the note back to him.

"I have nothing at all to say. What are you going to do about it?"

"I'll mighty soon show ye!" Lish almost shouted. "Git outen here. Cl'ar yerself sudden, an' don't let me find yer in sight when I come out, nuther!"

Oscar, who was so greatly bewildered that he scarcely knew what he was doing, put on his overcoat and cap and left the cabin, the wolfer stepping out of the door and covering him with his rifle as he passed.

"Well," said he resignedly, as he walked slowly toward the brook, "this knocks us. There is no way out of this scrape. The man's object is revenge as well as plunder, and he'll not leave us a skin. My rifle, revolver, ammunition, and provisions will all go, too; for what he can't carry away he will doubtless destroy. O Tom, how could you put him up to such a thing?"

Having reached the willows, Oscar found a hiding-place among them, and set himself to watch the movements of the robber. Of course he could not tell what he was doing inside the cabin, but he noticed that he came to the door every few minutes and looked down the valley toward the gorge.

Oscar knew that he was watching for Big Thompson, and wished most heartily that the guide would make his appearance. But luck was on the wolfer's side this time, and he was allowed to proceed with his depredations without being disturbed.

After he had been at work in the cabin a quarter of an hour, he came to the door, carrying over his shoulder the plunder he had selected, and which was made up in the form of a pack-saddle.

This made it evident that he intended to make either the pony or the mule carry it home for him. He wanted to catch the mule, knowing him to be a valuable animal; but that sagacious quadruped had evidently had quite enough to do with Lish, for, when the man approached, he turned his heels toward

him, laid back his ears, and seemed so anxious to get a kick at him that the robber dared not go near him.

So he was obliged to content himself with the guide's pony, which offered no resistance as Lish caught him by the foretop and led him toward the cabin.

After slipping a bridle over his head and placing his plunder upon his back, the wolfer took a last look at the gorge and led the pony up the valley out of sight, the mule following quietly at his heels.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE TABLES TURNED.

WHEN the wolfer had disappeared, Oscar arose from his place of concealment and walked slowly toward the cabin. While on the way his attention was attracted by the actions of the mule; which, after following the pony a short distance down the valley, stopped and brayed after him, as if urging him to come back.

Oscar supposed that he would, of course, go off with the mustang (the two animals never seemed to be easy when they were out of sight of each other), but the mule showed no desire to do anything of the kind.

He called to his companion several times, and then, turning about, galloped up to Oscar and brayed at him, as if he were trying to tell him how lonely he was.

"So you are going to stay with me, are

you?" said the boy dolefully. "That is very kind of you. I must give you back to your master in the spring, and if you had gone off, I should have been two hundred dollars more out of pocket; but where I should have raised the money to pay for you is more than I can tell. Come on, old fellow!"

The mule followed Oscar toward the cabin, and would probably have gone in there with him, if the door had not been closed in his face.

Oscar was gone but a minute, and when he came back he had a piece of hard tack in his hand. He gave the mule a bite of it, and, holding the rest just in front of his nose, led him around to his quarters and shut him up. Oscar felt a little easier after that.

Having put it out of the mule's power to run after his companion, the young taxidermist went back into the cabin to see how things looked there. It was in the greatest confusion; but, without wasting any time in useless repining, he set to work to restore order.

At the end of half an hour he had got matters in such a shape that he could make an estimate of his losses. His rifle was gone from its place over the door, but the cartridges that belonged to it were all there. The thief had not taken them, because he did not know how to manage a breech loader; and he had carried off the rifle in order to put it out of Oscar's power to follow him and recover his property by force of arms. A good portion of the bacon and crackers was missing, but the cans containing the condensed milk and preserved fruits were none of them gone. The robber did not know what they were. The saddles, bridles, both his blankets, all his cherished specimens, and every one of the skins he and the guide had trapped had disappeared; but the wolfer had not wantonly destroyed anything, and Oscar was very thankful for that.

This forbearance on his part was all owing to his wholesome fear of Big Thompson. If Lish had known that his dreaded enemy was more than forty miles from the valley, and

increasing the distance at every step, he would have taken more time to select his plunder; and his desire to be revenged upon Oscar for something the boy never did might have led him to burn all that he could not carry away.

Having put everything that was left in its place, Oscar threw a few sticks of wood on the fire, drew a stool up beside it, and sat down to think over the events of the day; but an instant afterward he jumped to his feet, placed the stool in front of the door, stepped upon it, thrust his hand into the space between the roof and the topmost log, and could scarcely repress a shout of exultation when his hand come in contact with something wrapped in a piece of deer-skin.

"The thief didn't get this, anyway," he said, as he drew the stool back to the fire. "If I had had it in my hands when I first saw his ugly head sticking in at the door, I don't know whether he would have had so easy a time in robbing the cabin or not."

As Oscar spoke, he unwrapped the deer-skin and brought to light a silver-mounted revolver

and two boxes of cartridges. When he first came into the hills, he had always been in the habit of carrying the weapon with him on his hunting excursions ; but, having seen how handy it was to have something else in his belt when it became necessary to build a fire in the woods or to cut a drag, he had put the revolver carefully away, and carried a hatchet instead.

While Oscar sat holding the weapon in his hand, an idea suddenly suggested itself to him —one that caused him the most intense excitement, and led him to believe that his affairs were not in so desperate a state after all.

Why could he not follow the robber, watch his camp when he saw him leave it, run up and recover the articles that had been stolen from him, and get away with them before Lish returned ? Or, what was to hinder him from making use of the very tactics which the wolfer had so successfully employed—namely, surprising him in his camp, ordering him out of doors at the muzzle of his revolver, and making off with his property ; taking with him the robber's rifle, so that the latter could not pursue him with any hope of success.

"I'll do it!" said Oscar to himself. "We are both out of reach of the law; and, since there is no officer here to protect me, I have a perfect right to protect myself. Yes, sir; I'll do it."

Oscar was so very highly elated that he could not sit still; so he arose from his stool and walked up and down the cabin while he matured his plans, which were to be carried into operation the following morning.

Being afraid to allow the mule his liberty, he cut a quantity of cottonwood boughs which he threw into the stable for him to browse upon; brought him some water from the brook; and, having provided for his comfort as well as he could, left the cabin—with his revolver for company—to make the round of Big Thompson's traps. He knew that the best way to make the time pass rapidly was to keep busy.

By daylight the next morning breakfast had been disposed of; and Oscar, having put on his overcoat—taking care to see that his trusty revolver and a plentiful supply of cartridges were safely stowed away in one of

the pockets—released the mule from his prison and sprang upon his back.

Did that long-eared animal know where he was going, and what he intended to do? It certainly looked like it; for, during the whole of the journey to and from the wolfer's cabin, he was under as perfect control of his rider as he would have been if he had had a bit in his mouth.

Oscar guided him by touching his head with his hand on the side opposite to that toward which he wished him to turn. But he did not require any guidance at all after he struck the pony's trail.

He followed it through all its windings, and in due time brought his rider to the place where the wolfer had passed the night. It was in his old camp—the one he and Tom had occupied when they first came into the valley.

The fire was still burning, and this showed Oscar that he was close upon the heels of the robber.

From this point forward Oscar was often obliged to check the mule's impatience, which he did by talking to him. The animal, if left

to himself, would have broken into a gallop and brought the boy face to face with Lish in less than half an hour; but this was something that Oscar particularly wished to avoid.

His object must be accomplished by strategy, or it could not be accomplished at all. What he was most afraid of was that the mule would give notice of his approach and warn the thief at the same time by setting up one of his resounding brays; but happily his fears were not realized. The animal was as silent as though he had lost all power to utter a sound.

After leaving the camp in which the wolfer had passed the night, the trail wound through a deep gorge that led from one valley to the other.

It was about ten miles across here, and the eager mule walked so much faster than the pony could with his heavy burden that if he had had a mile further to go he would have brought the thief and his pursuer together before the camp was reached.

He nearly overtook Lish as it was, for he was not more than ten minutes behind him.

Almost before Oscar knew it he found him-

LISH THE WOLFER FOILED.

self riding out of the gorge into a valley, and there, a little to his left and in plain view of him, was a smouldering fire, and beside it stood Big Thompson's pony, with his pack still on his back.

Under the lean-to, in front of which the miserable fire was smoking, was a prostrate figure, dressed in a suit of clothes that Oscar instantly recognized, and over him stood Lish the Wolfer, holding a heavy switch in his hand.

Both were talking loudly, one commanding and threatening, while the other begged and protested. The next moment the wolfer began a fierce attack upon the prostrate figure, who struggled feebly, and cried in vain for mercy.

All this passed in half a minute's time. Oscar, astonished and alarmed by his unexpected proximity to the wolfer's camp, tried to stop the mule; but the animal, which up to this moment had been so docile and obedient, disregarded his commands, uttered a loud bray, and started on a full gallop for the camp. He had seen his companion, and a curb-bit would

not have kept him from hastening to join him.

But Oscar made no further effort to check him; he did not think of it. All idea of concealment and strategy was gone now. His brother was being severely beaten before his eyes; and, worse than that, he was taking the punishment without making any determined effort at resistance. This proved that there was something the matter with him, and that he needed help. Fortunately for Tom, it was close at hand.

While the wolfer, warming to his work, was putting in his blows with such force that the end of the switch began to show signs of wear, something like a clap of thunder sounded close to his ear; and, when he picked himself up from the corner of the lean-to, into which he had been sent headlong by Oscar's terrific blow, he saw the two brothers with their arms around each other. The face of one was suffused with tears, while that of the other wore a threatening scowl. In this one's right hand, which was supporting Tom's head, was something that was still more threatening—a

cocked revolver, whose muzzle was pointed toward the corner from which the bewildered wolfer was slowly rising.

"Tom! Tom! what is the meaning of all this?" cried Oscar in great alarm. "Tell me quick what has happened. Why, what's this?"

The hand which he drew tenderly across his brother's battered countenance was marked with a crimson stain.

Oscar gazed at it a moment in speechless amazement; then he looked at his brother's bandaged foot, and finally he turned his eyes toward the wolfer.

At the sight of him he jumped to his feet, caught up the switch, which had fallen from the wolfer's hand, and attacked him with the greatest fury. Lish howled loudly, and tried to fight off the blows, but he might almost as well have tried to resist Big Thompson. His active young assailant was as strong just then as two boys of his age generally are; and, to show that he had both the determination and the pluck to back up his strength, we will simply mention the

fact that when Lish, driven desperate with pain, dashed forward to close with him, Oscar met him full in the face with a left-hander that knocked him clean through the brush side of the lean-to.

"Look out, Oscar! Look out!" cried the amazed and terrified Tom, who now, for the first time, found his tongue. "He's got a knife!"

But Oscar's blood was up, and he did not heed the warning. He ran quickly out of the front of the lean-to, intending to meet Lish on the outside. But the latter was too smart for him. He was almost out of sight in the woods, running like a deer, his hair sticking straight out in the wind behind him.

"What's the matter with you?" panted Oscar, as he threw all that was left of the switch upon the fire. "Have you frozen one of your feet?"

"No; I cut it with an axe," sobbed Tom. "O Oscar, you don't know how glad I am to see you again!"

These were the pleasantest words to which the boy had listened since he left home. There

was so much meaning in them that a protracted conversation between them was not necessary.

"Can you sit on a horse?" he asked.

"I can try," replied Tom, smiling through his tears. "But I am pretty weak, and almost frozen. I have had nothing much to eat for thirty-six hours, and I haven't been able to get about to gather any firewood."

"Hasn't your partner taken care of you?" exclaimed Oscar.

"Not by a great sight. He stole my last blanket, took almost all the food we had, and left me to shift for myself. When you came, he was beating me because I could not get him something to eat. How could I make him a cup of coffee when there wasn't any coffee?"

Oscar jerked the remnant of the switch off the fire and went out to look for Lish. But that worthy was out of sight.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

BIG THOMPSON'S HUNTING DOG.

"WELL, I declare, Oscar! How nicely you are situated, and how well you live!"

Tom Preston gave a sigh of satisfaction as he settled back on his elbow and put down his cup, after taking a refreshing drink of the strong, hot coffee.

He lay upon a comfortable bed, beside a roaring fire; and his foot, which bore an ugly looking wound, had just been dressed with some soothing liniment.

Beside him, on the floor, was the best dinner he had eaten for many a day, consisting of juicy venison steaks, corn-bread, canned fruit, and pickles.

He and Oscar had been at home about twenty-four hours, and the cabin was wearing its old-time look again. The specimens and skins

were all there, so were the saddles and bridles, and Oscar's breech loader rested in its accustomed place over the door.

Everything the wolfer had stolen had been recovered except the small portion of bacon he had eaten in his camp in the upper end of the valley; and there was, also, one thing there he did not steal—at least from Oscar—that was his rifle.

At first the young hunter did not know whether to take the weapon home with him or not, for he had no desire that the wolfer should starve for want of means to procure food. But Tom insisted on it, and Oscar at last yielded to his wishes.

"He's as treacherous as the wolf he hunts," declared Tom, "and if you leave him that rifle, he will surely waylay you and use it against you. Take it by all means. It will help pay for the skins and blanket he has stolen from me. You needn't be afraid that he will starve. Nearly all the fresh meat we have had this winter I caught in my snares, and he can get some in the same way. We will leave him his pony, so that he can get his

spelter to the settlement in the spring, and that is all we will do for him."

The return journey had been accomplished without any mishap. The mule led the way, carrying the pack. Tom came next, riding Big Thompson's pony, and Oscar brought up the rear on foot.

They spent the first night in the wolfer's abandoned camp, arriving at the cabin about noon on the following day.

They could not travel faster on account of Tom's injuries. The wound in his foot was very painful, and he was black and blue all over from the beating the wolfer had given him; but his tongue was all right, and he kept it going incessantly.

He gave his brother a truthful account of his wanderings, which we do not repeat here because it has nothing to do with our narrative; and the stories he told of his partner's tyranny, and the description he gave of the sufferings he experienced while he was alone in camp, made Oscar wish most heartily that he had used something besides a switch on the wolfer.

He told how he had tried to injure his brother because he envied him in his prosperity, but Oscar would not allow him to dwell upon that.

He knew all about it, he said; it was all past and gone, and they would not make themselves unhappy by referring to it, or even thinking of it again.

He said everything he could to strengthen Tom's resolutions of amendment, and had the satisfaction of knowing, in after years, that the severe lessons the latter had received during his sojourn among the hills had not been thrown away upon him.

For a week or two the brothers kept a constant watch for the wolfer; and, if he had come near that camp again, he would have met with the warmest kind of a reception. But he had already put a good many miles between himself and that valley, and Tom and Oscar never saw him again.

Everything went smoothly with them after that. Tom's foot healed rapidly, and in a few days he was able to get about and do his share of work in the cabin, which he kept as neat as a new pin.

The stolen traps were again doing duty at the brook; and Oscar, without saying a word to his brother about it, every day laid by a portion of the skins he took from them, to be sold for Tom's benefit.

It would be hard work for the latter to begin his new life with empty hands, and it would perhaps encourage him to know that he had a few dollars to fall back upon in case of emergency.

As soon as he was able to ride to the brook without inconvenience, Tom put out a few dead-falls for himself, and it was not long before the skins he captured exceeded in value those the wolfer had stolen from him.

The weeks wore on, and finally Oscar began to look anxiously for Big Thompson. Every other day he and Tom rode down to the gorge to see if they could discover any signs of his approach, but they always came back disappointed.

The guide, however, was daily making long strides toward them, fully as impatient to see Oscar as the boy was to see him, and he arrived when he was least expected. One night,

just after the supper table had been cleared away, he walked into the cabin, wrapped up in his soldier's overcoat, and carrying his rifle and snow-shoes over his shoulder.

Oscar sprang to meet him; and the greeting that passed between them gave Tom some idea of the strength of the affection they cherished for each other.

"Who's that thar?" demanded the guide, when his eyes fell upon the new occupant of the cabin.

"That's my brother," replied Oscar. "Tom, this is my guide, of whom you have often heard me speak."

Tom arose and extended his hand, but the guide pretended that he did not see it. He put his rifle and snow-shoes in one corner of the cabin, and then turned and looked down at Tom.

"So yer the fine young feller as wanted to bust my pardner up, be ye?" said he sternly, while Tom grew a shade whiter as he noticed the expression that settled on the speaker's face.

"Now, Thompson, that's enough of that," interrupted Oscar. "It was all settled long

ago. Don't say another word about it, for we want to forget it."

"I'm amazin' proud to hear it," growled the guide. "But if ye can't forgit it, an' it aint settled nuther, an' ye wan't it should be settled——"

He finished the sentence by striking his clenched hand into his open palm.

"But I tell you it is settled!" exclaimed Oscar. "Sit down and don't spoil a family reunion by showing your temper. Let us see how agreeable you can be. If you don't, the next time I see you pursued by a grizzly, I'll——"

"Say no more, perfessor," said Big Thompson, the scowl instantly fading from his face. "Put it thar!"

"Excuse me," answered Oscar, thrusting his hands into his pockets. "Where are my letters and papers?"

The guide did not act as though he heard the question. He pulled his pipe from his pocket, and, after filling and lighting it with a brand from the fire, he drew a stool close to Oscar's side and sat down.

"Now," said he, "I'm all ready. Go on."

"Go on with what?"

"I want to know jest everything that's happened in this yere valley since I've b'en gone. An' I say ag'in, go on."

Oscar, who knew that it was of no use to oppose the guide when he had determined upon any particular course of action, began the story of his adventures, intending to hurry through with it as soon as he could, and make another demand on Big Thompson for the letters and papers he carried in his pocket; but, as he dwelt upon the exciting scenes through which he had so recently passed, he became interested, and, before he knew it, he was giving a spirited and graphic account of them.

Big Thompson kept his eyes fastened upon the boy's face, listening so intently that he allowed his pipe to go out; and he almost jumped from his seat when Tom exclaimed, as Oscar was about winding up his story:

"You ought to have seen him, Thompson. He knocked Lish flatter than a pancake twice, and thrashed him until he wore a five-foot switch down to two. I lay there and saw it all."

"Perfessor," said the guide, whose astonishment and admiration knew no bounds, "did ye lick Lish in a fair rough an' tumble?"

"I made him stop pounding my brother," replied Oscar, "and I recovered everything he stole from us, into the bargain."

"Perfessor," repeated the guide, "put 'em thar! Put 'em both thar!"

But Oscar very wisely made all haste to put them somewhere else. He put them into his pockets, and the guide, not knowing any other way in which to express his hearty approval of his employer's conduct, brought one of his huge hands down upon his knee with such force that the boy shook all over.

This action was taken as a declaration of hostilities by a formidable body guard the guide had brought with him. A shrill bark, followed by a series of growls that were meant to be very fierce, came from somewhere about Big Thompson's person, and the next instant a very diminutive head, surmounted by a pair of fox-like ears and covered with hair so long that it almost concealed the knowing little eyes that glared upon him, suddenly appeared from

between the buttons of the guide's overcoat, and a row of sharp white teeth gleamed in the firelight.

Oscar started back with an exclamation of astonishment, while Tom and the guide gave vent to hearty peals of laughter.

"Perfessor," said the latter, thrusting his hand inside his overcoat and drawing out the animal to which the head belonged, the smallest, homeliest specimen of a Scotch terrier that Oscar had ever seen, "that thar big elk is jest as good as skinned an' stuffed already. I call him Pink, on account of the color of his ha'r—which is black. What do you think of him fur a huntin' dog?"

"A hunting dog!" repeated Oscar, still more astonished. "Do you mean to tell me that you are going to catch that magnificent elk with such a miserable little—— Humph! You can't get a fair view of him without the aid of a microscope, and a fair-sized rat would scare him to death. Now hand out my mail."

Big Thompson complied this time, and he had a good bundle of it, too, when it was all put together—papers from Eaton and Yarmouth,

letters from his mother, Sam Hynes, and Leon Parker, others from Professor Potter and the committee, and the rest were from the officers of the fort, who praised him extravagantly for the courage he had exhibited in his encounter with the grizzly, the particulars of which they had heard from Big Thompson.

The papers were passed over to Tom, and Oscar also gave him all his letters to read, with the exception of two, addressed in a neat, feminine hand, which were put safely away in his pocket, only to be taken out again at intervals and read and reread until they were almost worn out.

The boys became silent after the letters appeared, for the news they contained made them homesick.

Big Thompson, finding that nothing more was to be got out of his employer that night, cooked and ate a hearty supper and went to bed, his little hunting dog curling himself up with him under the blankets.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

FAREWELL TO THE HILLS.

"I SAY, perfessor, what in creation brung that thar brother of yours out to this country, and throwed him into the company of such a varmint as that Lish?" asked Big Thompson, as Oscar joined him at the wood-pile the next morning, where he stood taking an observation of the weather.

"Oh, he came out here to make his fortune; and, like a good many others who have tried it, he spent all his money, and had to take up with the first thing that came in his way."

With this introduction, Oscar went on to tell as much of Tom's history as he was willing the guide should know. He went more into the particulars of the matter than he would have done under almost any other circumstances, for he saw very plainly that his companion was not at all pleased to have Tom there.

He very naturally supposed that anyone who could willingly associate with such a fellow as the wolfer must of necessity be as bad and worthless as he was, and Oscar's first task was to free his mind from this impression. His next was to awaken sympathy for the unfortunate Tom, and in both these efforts he succeeded beyond his expectations.

He had the gratification of seeing that, after his conversation with him, Big Thompson was as friendly toward Tom as he was toward himself.

"He is not going home with me," said Oscar in conclusion. "He came out here with a good deal of money in his pocket, and I don't blame him for wanting to stay until that money is all replaced. When we get to the fort I am going to see what I can do for him."

Oscar felt better after this talk with his guide, and urged him to hurry up the breakfast, as he was impatient to see that fine hunting dog at work.

He made all sorts of sport of the shaggy, ill-looking little fellow, who must have understood some of his disparaging remarks, for he

promptly and fiercely resented every attempt that Oscar made to scrape an acquintance with him. Big Thompson only grinned and nodded his head, as if to say, "Wait and see," and so confident was he of success during the coming hunt that he told Tom to follow about a mile in their rear with the mule, and come up to them when he heard them shoot.

Breakfast over, the two hunters set out on foot, Big Thompson carrying his dog under his arm; and, after three hours' rapid walking through the willows that lined the banks of the brook, they came within sight of the grove at the upper end of the valley. When they had approached within a quarter of a mile of it, the boy's heart bounded with hope, for he saw a large elk—the very one he wanted most—walk out of the timber, take a look about him, and then walk back again.

The guide now took the lead, moving with noiseless steps, and Oscar followed close behind.

They approached within less than two hundred yards of the grove without alarming the game, and there they halted. It was evident that a number of elk were browsing in the

grove, for the bushes could be heard crashing in every direction.

"Now, then," whispered the guide, lifting the dog in the air, so that he could look over the thicket behind which they had crept for concealment, "do you hear 'em in thar? If yer sartin ye do, go in and fetch 'em out."

He placed the dog upon the ground, and the little animal was off like a shot. He ran with surprising swiftness across the intervening space, and disappeared in the grove, which presently began to echo with his shrill bark.

This was followed by an increased commotion in the bushes, and Oscar's first thought was that the insignificant little beast was driving the elk away; but Big Thompson must have had a different opinion, for just then he laid his hand on the boy's arm, and said, in a very low tone:

"He's found 'em. Get yer we'pon ready, kase he'll fetch 'em out in plain sight afore long."

And so it proved. The lordly elk, finding themselves pursued by so small an animal—the like of which they had never seen before—

stopped and stared at him with great curiosity; and finally, becoming annoyed by his constant yelping, they began to show their displeasure by stamping their fore feet on the ground and making short dashes at him.

As fast as they advanced, the dog retreated in the direction of the willows in which the hunters were concealed; and a few minutes later he came pell-mell out of the bushes, closely pursued by one of the does.

Then Oscar saw, for the first time, what the dog's tactics were. As soon as the doe stopped, he wheeled about and began barking at her again, keeping just far enough away to be out of reach of her dangerous hoofs, and close enough to annoy her.

The rest of the herd came out, one after the other—there must have been twenty-five or thirty of them in all—and the last one that appeared was the big elk.

He took up a position between the doe and his companions; and, after making one or two unsuccessful efforts to strike him with his hoofs, stood still and shook his horns at him. The animals were all so much interested in

Pink and his movements that they did not seem to think of anything else.

"What do ye think of that mis'able leetle cur dorg now, perfessor?" whispered the guide, as Oscar cocked his rifle and raised it slowly and cautiously to his shoulder. "Take all the time ye want, and don't shoot till yer hands is stiddy and ye kin git a fair squint. If they don't wind us, Pink'll fetch 'em right into—— I say, ye done it, didn't ye?"

While the guide was uttering these words of caution and advice, Oscar's rifle spoke; and the big elk, pierced through the spine, fell to his knees and rolled over dead.

The rest of the herd fled in the greatest confusion; and Pink, alarmed by the noise of the hoofs, and believing, no doubt, that they were about to charge him in a body, took to his heels and made all haste to get into the willows; but, finding that he was not pursued, he quickly mustered up courage sufficient to run back to the prostrate elk, which he was the first of the party to examine.

"I've got him at last, thanks to you, Thompson," said Oscar, as he leaned on his

rifle and looked down at the fallen monarch. "In all my collection there is but one specimen that I value more highly than this one, and that is the grizzly. Pink, you're a brick, and I'll never make sport of you again."

The dog evidently did not appreciate the compliment, or else he did not put any faith in the promise; for, when Oscar attempted to lay his hand on his head, the little animal backed away and growled savagely at him.

Tom presently came up with the mule, and, in two hours more, the new specimen had been carried to the cabin and Oscar was hard at work upon it.

This was Oscar's last notable exploit among the foot-hills. Of course the sport did not end with the shooting of the monarch elk, for there were still many animals in the valley that were not represented in his collection, and Oscar's efforts to secure them were not always unattended by danger.

He kept on adding to his specimens, and now and then he did something in a quiet way that made him feel good for a week.

One of these achievements was the bagging

of the wolverine which had so often robbed his traps. The animal was fairly outdone in cunning, and knocked over when he did not know that there was an enemy near him.

The rest of the winter was passed in much the same way as were the days whose incidents we have so minutely described. The hunters devoted a good deal of their time to trapping, and their pile of skins grew larger every day.

The traditional January thaw came at last, and set the eaves to dropping and the brook to running for a few days; and then Jack Frost reasserted his power, and shut everything up tight again.

Many a hard storm roared through the valley after that, but the weather gradually grew warmer, the snow melted slowly away, and finally the grass began to appear in the sunniest places, and the drifts to look as though the wind had scattered dust over them.

It was no longer necessary to cut down trees for the pony and mule to feed upon. They preferred the withered grass to the innutritious buds and twigs of the cottonwood, and the

change in their diet soon began to make a change in their appearance and spirits.

Spring was coming, but so slowly that Oscar grew tired of waiting for it. It seemed as though the deep drifts in the gorge would never melt away; and when they did, a roaring torrent, which showed no indications of drying up, took their place. The grass in the valley was seen before the gorge was passable.

The day of their deliverance was close at hand, however, and one bright morning the guide aroused the slumbering boys by shouting out the order to "catch up."

This meant to cook and eat the breakfast, saddle the pony, and hitch the mule to the wagon, which had for days been loaded and ready for the start.

These duties consumed but little of their time, for all three worked as if they were in a great hurry.

In less than an hour the wagon, with Tom and the guide on the seat, was on its way down the valley, while Oscar lingered behind for a moment to make sure that nothing had been forgotten.

It was not without a feeling of sadness that he took his last look about the cabin in which he had spent so many happy hours.

The journey to the fort was safely and quickly accomplished.

They found Ike Barker in his dug-out, and the greeting he extended to them was cordial, indeed.

He kept Oscar busy until midnight relating the incidents of his life in the foot-hills; but there were some things that happened there which he did not hear from the boy's lips, for his modesty compelled him to leave them out.

He heard them from the lips of Big Thompson, who finished the story after Oscar had gone to sleep. The ranchman was delighted at what the guide told him, and took his own way to show it.

"Mr. Barker," said Oscar the next morning at breakfast, "I am greatly indebted to you for your kindness, and I am sorry that I can return you nothing but my hearty thanks. There are your mule and wagon, and if——"

"Don't want 'em!" exclaimed the ranchman. "I've got better. Take 'em up to the post

an' sell 'em for what you can get. Look here, professor," he added hastily, seeing that the boy was about to speak, "I know I don't live like one of the royal blood, but I've got money for all that; and, if you think you are in danger of running short of funds, say the word and I'll lend you all you want. You saved Thompson's life, and whipped Lish the Wolfer in a fair fight; and that shows that you are a boy after my own heart."

Oscar, who was greatly surprised at this kind offer, could only stammer out his thanks and reply that he did not stand in any need of pecuniary assistance.

"Then perhaps I can help you in another way," continued the ranchman, who was bent on showing his regard for Oscar. "I can give your brother something to do. I have been unfortunate myself, and I know how it seems to have a helping hand extended in time of trouble. Tom, how wonld you like to herd sheep?"

"I don't know. I never tried it. But I am willing to do anything that will bring me an honest living."

"That's the sort of spirit I like. I'll give you forty dollars a month and board, and a pony to ride. Yes or no?"

Tom said "Yes," of course; and, after a short consultation, it was decided that he should go to the post to sell his furs and see his brother off, and then come back to the ranch on foot, and assume his duties as sheep-herder.

Oscar afterward had a private interview with the ranchman, and left him with the feeling that Tom could not have fallen into better hands.

Oscar spent but two days at the fort—pleasant days they were, too, and everybody seemed glad to see him—for he was impatient to be on his way home.

Their furs, and the mule and wagon, were disposed of without the least trouble; and, out of the money he received, Tom gave Oscar two hundred dollars to be handed to Mr. Smith.

It wasn't much, Tom said, but still it would show the grocer that he intended to make all the amends in his power.

Tom and the guide assisted him to pack his specimens, which were put into boxes and addressed to himself at Yarmouth, and placed in the freight wagon that was to convey them to the nearest railroad station.

There was one thing that Oscar could not take back with him, greatly to his disappointment, and that was the fawn he had captured with the lasso.

These little animals never live long in confinement, especially if they have been driven hard previous to their capture; and it had died during his absence.

Lieutenant Warwick had seen to it that the skin was carefully preserved; but, as it had been taken off in the same manner that a butcher would remove the hide from a slaughtered ox, and was afterward tanned with the hair on, it was not of much value as a specimen. But then, somebody could make a rug of it, and so it was packed up to be taken to Eaton.

At last, when everything was ready for the start, and the farewells had all been said, Tom set out for Ike Barker's ranch, and Oscar stepped into the stage-coach.

His heart was by no means as light as he had supposed it would be, for the pleasure he anticipated in once more shaking hands with his friends in Eaton was marred by the sorrow he felt at parting from those with whom he had so long been associated.

But one thing was certain: the last few months of his life had not been wasted. He had earned money enough to lift the mortgage from the roof that sheltered his mother, and he had been able to assist Tom in his extremity. The latter was on the right track now, and Oscar fervently hoped that he would allow no temptations to switch him off.

Sam Hynes, warned by a telegram which Oscar sent from Albany, met the returned hunter at the depot, and stuck to him night and day during the week he spent in Eaton, where everybody made a lion of him.

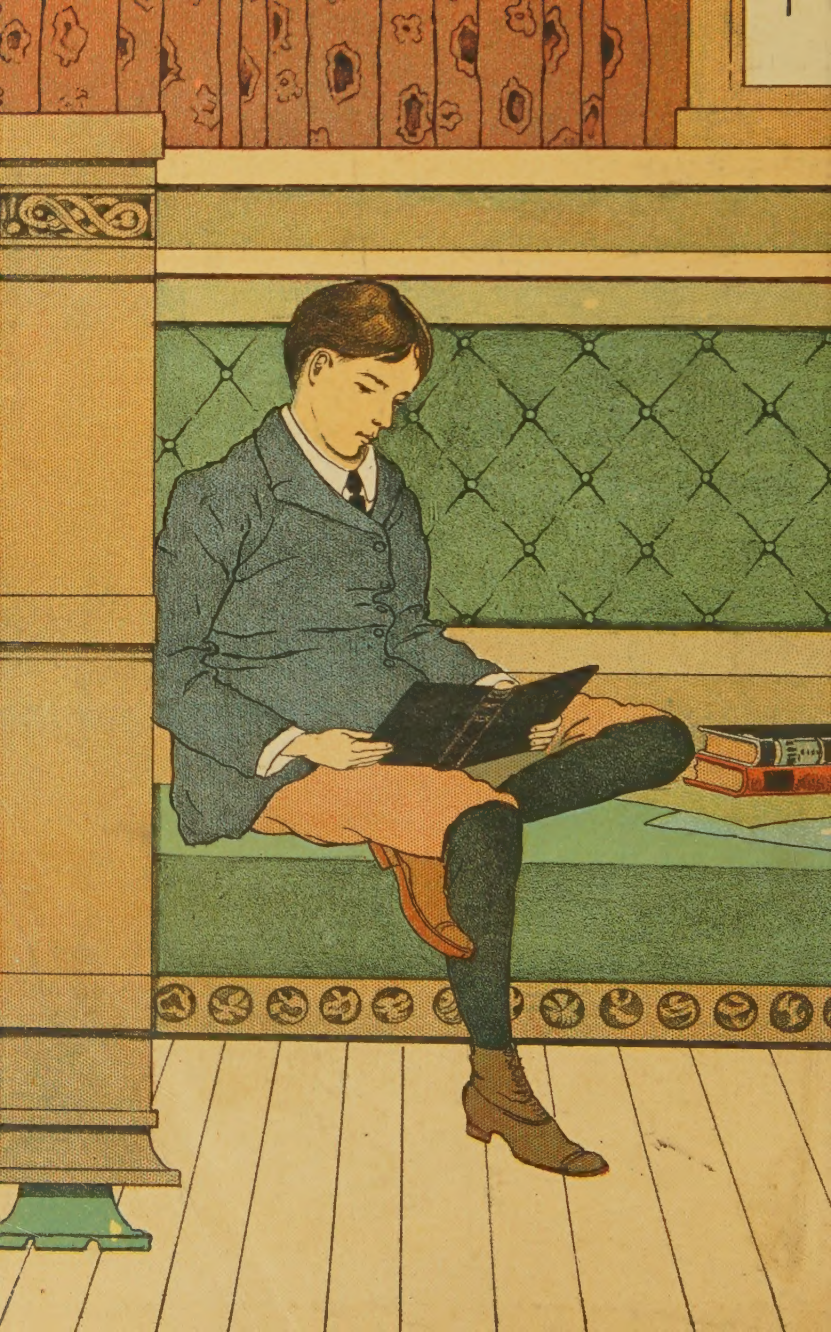
His mother, of course, was overjoyed to meet him, and listened with a beating heart to what he had to say in regard to Tom, who, during the rest of his life on the plains, was the regular recipient of something that did

much to sustain and encourage him in his efforts to reform—a mother's letters.

That week passed all too quickly for Oscar, who, at the end of it, was once more obliged to tear himself away from home and go to work.

He had months of it before him, too, for the specimens he had secured were all to be stuffed and mounted. He was almost overwhelmed by the attentions he received on every hand.

It was not long before everybody in the city knew who he was and what he had done; at least it seemed so, for everybody stared at him on the streets, and Oscar finally began to wish that he was back in the foot-hills, out of sight.

The committee were more than pleased with his success, and with the appearance of his specimens; and the first year he spent in their employ was only the beginning of a long and profitable engagement with them.

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